

# THE LITTLE BLACK BOX

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SET IN A SMALL HOSPITAL in the hill country of Northern India, this novel tells of the last weeks in the life of an Indian woman. Sarala is rich—the little black box under her bed is known to contain great wealth. She has cut herself off from all her relations, but now the doctor insists that they be summoned to her bedside. As the story unfolds we learn of Sarala's strange, equivocal past, of how her adoration of her brother has changed to bitterness and hatred, and in particular how her wealth has been acquired and why she cannot bring herself to dispose of it.





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BLACK BOX

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TO MY MOTHER



# I

THEY thought I was going to die and even now I can see them looking at me with a sort of pitying wonder in their eyes. "You were so cold," she said to me, "Surya himself could not have warmed you." They brought blankets and hot-water bottles and braziers in which the coal had been fanned into flames. They turned the room into a furnace so that when they entered it the sweat would start up on their foreheads and pour down their cheeks. But my skin remained dry, the ice in my veins stiffening my flesh and freezing the pain into numbness. I shiver even now, with the temperature over a hundred in the shade, to think how cold I was.

This morning I woke to find myself lying in a pool of water. The sweat had soaked through to the webbing of the bed and my fingers had stuck together with the oozing perspiration. They had to change my bed as well as my clothes. "Thank God," the doctor said when he came hurrying in to me.

God? What did God have to do with it? Who and what is he, this formless thing, that they've brandished over my head for as long as I can remember? A thunder-cloud that passes, rainless, across the sky, its monstrous shape dissolving into thin wisps of nothingness as it disappears from sight. A phrase, a collection of sounds that come easily to the lips. An invention; rather overworked perhaps because no one has yet found an imitation-proof

patent. They all take refuge in demarcating spheres of influence: don't poach, this is my preserve, my revelation, try another. It's all so ridiculous that we ought to die laughing. But then we are civilised creatures now, men of reason. We expurgate, cleanse, refine; and what will not yield to our touch we damn.

But fire! Fire is reality, life, resurrection. I know that for an elemental truth. It brought me back; its fervour sent the blood coursing through my veins again. Fire was the only reality. And yet they would have me abandon the reality and seek the shadow. I can feel the pain in my limbs again, the pain that seems to tear the flesh from my bones. I can lie still and tense, dreading the movement that will thrust the fiendish claws into my chest again. And the measure of my return to normal is that I must thank God for it. I must thank God for life and the bitter, endless routine of that life which keeps me chained to this bed.

So complete is my recovery that even the woman hasn't troubled to stay with me. She who only yesterday did not dare to leave my bedside has abandoned me now. She has left me alone in this world of twilight where the silence is so heavy that it lies like a weight across my body. I know it will not last, that very soon—when darkness blacks out shapes and forms—the silence will be shattered. But what use is that knowledge to me now? I like the noises as little as I like the silence and there's a pulse in my throat which throbs with desperation and threatens to choke me. God! This is the worst moment of the day and I must live through it alone with nothing but my thoughts for company—my bitter, cheerless thoughts. This is what I must thank You for.

In the gathering darkness I've already lost the outlines of my room. I can feel the wall closing in towards me but

must imagine the empty apertures of door and window from which the panes have long since been removed. Outside, beyond the verandah, the darkness isn't yet complete and through the jigsaw of the wooden screen I can still make out the contours of the plain. Flat, limitless, it seems to stretch into infinity, with nothing to break the straightness of the line, nothing to mark the place where the land ends and the sky begins. The ball of the sun is almost obliterated, cut off by this same nothingness; but the light of the evening has absorbed the red of its fire and the whole world seems to blush, as if in shame, at its departure. The soil, normally so grey and dull, has now acquired the tint of the sky, the air has changed colour, and even the sheets on my bed look as if they have been dipped in blood.

Whose blood? Whose blood is it that flows over the world at this hour?

There's one corner of my world, however, which the sun cannot touch; neither now at its departure nor at its zenith when it blazes down unrelenting on a land which shimmers and shrinks under its white rays. Beginning ten squares up and three squares to the right on my wooden screen, there is the dark smudge, unlit, unchanging, of the forest which juts into the flat monotony of the plain. Even in the dazzling brilliance of the day I can make no more of it than this dark smear, for it spurns me as it does the light, and the only tree that I can see is the one which stands in the adjoining field, a gaunt sentinel over the tangled denseness beyond.

That tree was struck by lightning long before I arrived, but as yet no one has cared to cut it down. The forest remains inscrutable, inviolate.

This is my world, as empty of human life as that tree is bare of leaves. Not long ago, when the sun still threw

long pencils of shadow across the grey earth, two little boys came to play outside my verandah. They were stark naked, with nothing to adorn their bodies but the charms strung around their necks with pieces of string. Their bodies had been burned black by the sun and there was such a gloss of velvety smoothness on their skins that I wanted to reach out and touch them. They had something on the ground between them and were so deeply absorbed in it that they did not feel my eyes upon them. I watched them with a sort of frenzied eagerness, wanting them to turn and perhaps smile at me; but the thing on the ground was too absorbing and I had to be content with their backs. I have never seen two little backs so lost in concentration, so alluring.

They turned at last, but not to my will. I sensed rather than heard their mother call out to them and they swung round to give one startled look in my direction before scattering to safety, the plaything on the ground forgotten. For one second, even as I made a final effort to win a smile from them, I saw them as they really were—pot-bellied from under-nourishment, eyes buried deep in shrunken cheeks, and the first hint of the disease around their swollen ears and noses. I didn't want their smiles then. I hated them. I called out angrily to the woman. "What the devil are those children doing around this side of the hospital? Don't they know that I must not be disturbed?" She knew me well enough not to answer but went out into the verandah to peer through the screen. "You won't find anything there," I snapped, hate making my voice sharp, "I sent them away soon enough. But why the devil don't these lepers stay in their own part of the hospital?" She'll see that no one invades my world and for a few days at least I shall have the peace which my lips demand. I should have liked to have asked her what it was they

had on the ground, but such is the legend I have built around myself that I must let it lie there forgotten. A trifle, a child's plaything abandoned in the moment of reproof; but the symbol of my own loathing, the scar of my legend. Yes, I am something like that forest. The darkness around me drives even the woman from me. She is impatient to be free of me.

She will return of course. When she does, stopping to shout goodnight to the watchman in the shadows, she will smooth my pillows and turn me over on to my side. It doesn't really matter which side she chooses for I shall have to call her again before many hours have passed to turn me over again. Towards midnight I shall wake her and she will warm a glass of milk for me, and then, if I am lucky, I shall be able to watch the dawn tint the sky without having to disturb her again.

How well I know the routine, backwards, inside-out, upside-down. It can be told in a minute but must be lived through a day, the days merging into weeks, the weeks into months. On and on until the beginning and the end become one in time and there's not even the faint whisper of memory to distinguish one from the other. How shall I stem this merciless current of the present which flows over me, obscuring the past, killing the future? Must I lie here for ever, so powerless and so helpless? Am I to become one with all this nothingness, the empty tree, the silent plain, the unbroken darkness?

Darkness is such a thing that it should fall silently, as if ashamed of what it brings; but here it comes with a harsh, arrogant clatter. It starts in silence, with that stillness of the earth which marks the passing of the sun more clearly than the blacking-out of its light. The birds might settle into the trees with a contented rustling and a stray breeze waft the scent of wood-smoke across the

air, but the earth itself is poised, breathless and uneasy, waiting for that sudden swift moment when the horizon will blot out the orb of the sun. It's a sharp fleeting silence but long enough for me to hear the clock by my bed beat out its passing. It seems as if that clock knows what's in store, for it beats more insistently, more urgently, until itself drowned by the hammering of my heart.

And then, in a second, so swiftly that the eye cannot mark it, the sun dips into the earth, the heat lifts as if to allow it passage, the darkness drops and the noise comes crashing into one's ears. Everything seems to happen at once so that there's no telling the different phases of the transformation, but there's order in it, the subtle synchronisation of an infernal machine. One moment there's the stillness of twilight and the next the uproar of night. The scraping of crickets, the buzzing drone of flying insects, the hissing movement of nameless things. And in the background, the crackling laugh of a hyena and the eternal baying of dogs.

These are the sounds, but they are as nothing to the invasion that they herald. There is one breed of things over which I have no power to deny entrance to my world. So ineffectual am I against them that it is I who have become the usurper and they the owners. They commandeer the verandah, the walls and even the floor; and I must sit enthroned on my bed, the autocrat subdued.

It's long since the walls of the verandah were white-washed and they've so absorbed the grey dust that I never tire of complaining about them. But now, at this moment, I take back all my harsh words and wish that they were so encrusted with filth as to be lost in the surrounding darkness. For now they are a dazzling white background for all the creepy-crawly things that use it for their night wanderings and I loathe the sight of them. Black and

scaly, brown and fleshy, they hold all the night's terrors for me. I hate to look at them and yet I cannot drag my eyes away. There's a horrible fascination in watching their manœuvres; in seeing a thick lizard, gorged to bursting as it is, ease its fantastic bulk across the wall: to see its tongue dart out and then one dark smudge less on the wall. I want to turn my back but I dare not.

The light beside me, feeble as it is, is scant consolation. It has now become the target for a breed of flying things that announce their arrival by the dull clink of their scales against the glass. I can't see them all but I can count their numbers and their strength by the note that they sound on the glass.

My greatest terror is that one of these things will fall on my bed. Even now I can hear the dull hissing sound it will make as its soft pulp hits the thin sheet and it slithers away. I can almost feel its slimy softness against my leg. Shall I ever find the strength to draw my leg away in time? I who cannot turn on to my side without the woman to help me?

Will she never come? She is ugly and withered and her breath has the foulness of age, but her hands will reach out to turn down the light, her voice will speak and drown these sounds.

## II

SHE was late last night, later than usual; but such have I become that I could not find the words to rebuke her. She stood in the doorway, steadying herself against the wall, and all my impatience and resentment were drowned in a flood of gratitude that she had come back to me again. I watched her stumble forward, greedily noting every detail about her, and I could have kissed her hands as she reached out to me. Yes, that is what I have become.

She is unlovely, uncouth. A thickened body too short for her head, teeth that protrude from a mouth that is blackened by the betel she's always chewing, and skin that's as wrinkled and dried as an unburied corpse. I've seen even the doctor shrink from her. But she has one saving grace, her voice. There's a quality of gentleness in it which is completely at variance with her appearance. "Busy working?" she asked, and she could have been Mother Earth herself.

Anything in the nature of writing, even doodling, is work to her. It can't be otherwise for she's completely illiterate and, like all illiterates, she lives in awe of pen and paper. She'd asked me once, when I wasn't as bad as this, to write a letter for her to her son. I wrote at her dictation and she leaned so close over me, watching the pen trace its pattern on the paper, that I could smell the sweat on her body. It cost her a great effort of will to send that letter. She carried it about with her for days, tucked

into the neck of her blouse; but she never asked me to write another. I had a haemorrhage soon after that and she is not yet convinced that it wasn't due to that exertion.

"You shouldn't start working so soon."

I didn't answer her for as she leaned over me I caught the odour of toddy, pungent and sour, on her breath. She's taking my silence too much for granted. There was a time, when she first took to slipping away like this, when she'd return with guilt in her eyes and brace herself warily for my objections. I never objected and now she's taken to staying away for longer and longer periods at a stretch. It started with half an hour; now it's two and she's even losing her sense of guilt about it. She's begun to look upon these two hours as one of the conditions of her service and makes no secret of her impatience if I detain her one minute past six o'clock. Of course I've committed myself by my silence, even to the point of providing her with an alibi. "We had a bad night last night," she'll tell the doctor, and I will nod in confirmation, knowing that it isn't lack of sleep which has made her eyes puffed and swollen.

I don't know why I allow it. The last word rests with me and I can end her nonsense in a trice. She must take care not to provoke me too far. The contents of the little black box under my bed make her my servant but the key is around my neck and I am not quick to forgive.

Why do I pretend to a power that I do not possess? Have I not the moral strength to bare my soul in the confessional of these pages? My money might tie the woman to me but that bond is not inviolate. I am tied to her by something more primeval. Last night, for instance, the rebuke was on my lips but when she lifted me off the pillows it died unspoken. I don't like to think of my

helplessness—that's why I cannot record all that she does for me—but this I must say: I cannot do without her. And she knows it.

She sleeps on the floor beside me and snores like an animal at bay but the sound does not jar in my ears. There's nothing else to do but listen as I wait for the dawn to clear the sky. The waiting can be bitter, for every minute drags, burdened by my reproaches. In the hours of darkness so much is possible. I can isolate my mistakes, find the courage to ridicule my failures, even eschew my revenge. But reality returns with the day and in its white light the dreams of the darkness are themselves ridiculous and improbable. Until another night comes and I begin to weave my fantasies again.

In the hours of darkness I am strong again and the future is bright with promise. The little black box under my bed gives me the power that I need; to laugh at their accusations and shrug off their derision. They cannot hurt me, they cannot touch me; I am the master and know what to do. I would be forever strong if the dawn didn't come to drain the confidence out of me again.

The doctor hasn't been in to see me today. He sent word that he had to go to Malegaon and wouldn't be back till late. He usually visits the dispensary there on Mondays, so this must be an urgent call. That's another sign of my return to normal. He obviously doesn't foresee another attack from me and in the face of this conviction I would not dare to have one. He's that kind of a man. But he could have come to see me before leaving. My room is less than five minutes' walk from his house. He could have delivered the message personally; fifteen minutes out of one thousand four hundred and forty, two punctilious sentences to fill a silent day. Is that asking too much of him?

A sparrow has just wandered into the verandah, a plump, perky little fellow who's perched himself on the wooden screen and is darting suspicious glances at me in my bed. I wonder what he wants, why he distrusts me. I wouldn't hurt him. He probably belongs to the family that have nested in the inner room. The woman once made the sweeper tie a shoe-box to the ceiling. "Better than all that straw they carry about," she said. But they still carry the straw. I've often picked pieces off my sheets and hidden them among the papers in the waste-paper basket—my attempt at a compromise. This one is probably the father; he has that look about him—the mantle of infallibility, the armour of sacrifice, the burden of every parent.

He's found what he's been looking for. One of the wooden slats of the screen had come loose from its setting and been tied in place with a piece of string. He's after that string, hanging himself on the slat and pecking away at it. I think the knot's too tight for him, but no, he's got it. By some lucky chance he got hold of the right end and the knot slipped open. The slat swinging out of place made him lose his balance and he had to jerk himself back, flailing his wings as a swimmer does his arms; but he kept a tight hold of the string and has, even now, flown into the inner room with it. "The trouble I had to get it," I can hear him saying, ready to turn his narrative into reproach at the first sign of indifference.

Must reproach always be part and parcel of a parent's duty? I've had so much time to think of late but this is one question I cannot answer. This seems to be the only thing that has endured whenever I think of those whom I loved. My mother with her gentle eyes. My father, my beloved father. Is this truly all that I have been able to salvage from the wreckage of their love? Is there nothing else?

What? In God's name what? Love grows cold and affection weakens, but reproach gathers strength with the passing of time, grows with the widening of the gulf between the dead and the living.

I must not think of this now. When I am stronger perhaps, when the mountain air loosens this knot in my heart. At the moment memory has deserted me, reason has fled. I am. That is all.

I wonder when I shall see the mountains again, my beloved mountains which hold the only peace that I know. There are cool breezes and views to strengthen the heart. Range upon range of endless, snow-topped peaks on which the sun lays a gentle hand; the air crisp with pine and snow. When shall I go there again? How long must I look upon the drab insensibility of this plain, the echoing emptiness of this room? The wash-stand is stained, the plaster cracking, and outside there is nothing but this grey dust which stifles the soul.

I've spoken to the doctor so often about this room. His invariable answer is to shrug and say that they are not a rich hospital. "If we had the money we could do many things." His innuendoes do not elude me. His meaning is quite plain. He can never keep his eyes off my little black box. It isn't every day that a God-forsaken hole like this has a rich patient. A coat of paint would make all the difference to me, but then I would forget that this is an institution that lives on charity. The ever-present reminder if not the ever-present help. Yes, the cracking plaster and the rotting woodwork all have their purpose. I must not forget charity. The charity of love-starved spinsters who pamper their miserable prejudices and indulge their barren pleasures by feasting their eyes on others' miseries. The charity of soulless men hungry for the kiss of gratitude. What do they know of what they

preach, these far-away people who pretend to virtue? One picture of a peasant's hovel is enough to make them reach for their pennies, but what do these pennies build? Hospitals which kill the will to live, doctors who stare at little black boxes, and a faith as barren as the spinsters themselves.

Well, I can't stop the doctor looking at my property; but I don't have to be bullied into submission by him. I care nothing for his preaching and even less for his beliefs. If he wants my money he must earn it; but he will not earn it by denying me a little of his precious time.

The woman's getting impatient. It's getting on for five o'clock and she has still to wash me. She's terribly suspicious of this book. "What are you writing," she keeps asking. I've just told her that I am writing about her and mistrust has made her eyes ugly. I wonder why she's so afraid of paper—but there, I must stop. If I don't she'll have her own revenge and the night is too long to be alone.

### III

THE doctor says that I am going to die. He gives me less than a month to live. Before the new moon my bed will be empty, my name a record in a case-book. Children will come to play in the courtyard outside and this room will echo to the sound of their laughter. Who will take my place in this bed? Another woman perhaps; but one surrounded by those who love her, a patient by whose bed the chairs will never be empty.

It's six hours since he spoke to me, six hours and ten minutes since he entered the room. He ordered the woman out immediately he set foot inside the door and his eyes fastened on the little black box.

"Did you sleep well last night?" I shook my head in exasperation. Why does he never look at me when he comes? Doesn't he know that the key to the little black box is around my neck? "You should sleep. Sleep is the best cure."

I mark my days by his visits. I count the hours. All he offers in return are these empty clichés. "But I like to stay awake at night," I muttered. "I do it on purpose. It's so quiet then, such a change from the daytime." He never reacts to my sarcasm, only returns it with a smile that does no more than dimple his cheek. It could be an attractive smile for his cheek has a sharp, clear cut; but against the background of his eyes it's no more than an aspect, an opinion.

He started to examine my bottles, shaking one, holding another up to the light. There's a veritable chemist's shop on that wash-stand but not one bottle with a red label. That he brings with him, measuring out each dose as niggardly as if it were liquid gold.

"I am going to change the routine. Six times a day instead of four. I've already told the woman." It's amazing how much of my life is ordered outside my hearing. The doctor changes my routine and though the woman scarcely seems to be out of my sight she has found the time and the privacy to discuss it with him. It's frightening in a way; as if they've snatched choice and volition out of my hands, hands which can still hold a pen, which can still clench with pain.

"What fun!" I retorted. "Can't you do this sort of thing more often?" He raised his eyebrows at that and I had to apologise. "I'm sorry. But it's hell being alone like this."

"All men must be alone sometimes."

"So say those who never are. They should try it and see."

He winced imperceptibly and I had the feeling that he too knew what it was to be alone. But it is a thing of his own choice and he is of the stuff that is made for solitude. The woman tells me that he spends hours alone in his room, sometimes with a book in his hands, sometimes staring into space. That's his own choice, he needn't lack for company. He is too cold and hard. Could any other man live as he does, on others' charity? Would any other man choose platitudes for consolation and empty smiles for comfort?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish I could do more for you. But there's no one here who could keep you company." Excepting he himself, but that would be too far beneath his dignity.

"It's not company I want. I want to do something, anything. I've still got a brain."

He moved over towards the foot of my bed. There's one chair always drawn up beside me but he never uses it. He prefers to stand over me, legs spread out and hands clasped behind him, that cold, arrogant look in his eyes. He gives the impression of arrogance in the most trivial of his mannerisms: the tilt of his head, the impersonality of his voice, even the touch of his hands.

"What do you want to do?"

Sometimes I have felt close to him, more akin to him than to the woman. Sometimes I have forgotten this barrier that he has erected between us. It was this feeling that prompted me to make my suggestion. I spoke eagerly, sincerely, believing for a moment—fool that I was—that the barrier was of my imagination. "Couldn't I help you in some way? You're always talking about how much there is to do. Couldn't I help you, keep the record books or something?"

He seemed to draw away from me. "That's very kind of you and I appreciate the thought but I already have a clerk who does the work for me. And besides, you must not exert yourself just yet. The woman tells me that you write a great deal. Is that necessary?"

There it was again, the evidence of their conspiracy against me. What times does the woman choose to go sneaking to him? "I'm not hurting anyone," I answered sullenly; "what I do in my own time is my own business."

"Of course. Perhaps it's good that you should have an interest but you must not overdo it. Rest and relaxation are the medicines for you."

"I shan't overdo it," I returned guardedly. I did not dare to argue the point with him. He's quite capable of taking this book away from me. Once, after my second

attack, he banned even the newspapers from my room and I had to lie and stare at the ceiling until I thought I should go mad.

He made no attempt to begin his examination and I remember wondering briefly why he should choose today to break a rigid routine. I was to have my answer very soon. There was an unusually speculative look in his eyes as he watched me but it was my remark which led to the death-sentence.

"Well, doctor?" I prompted.

"Well?" he answered, that tight and unyielding smile on his lips.

"I'm feeling very much better even though you don't seem to think so. When can I leave?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the mountains. I was on my way there, remember?"

"What's wrong with this place?"

"Wrong? Just look at it."

He dropped his eyes. "We're not a rich hospital."

There it is again, I thought, and the antagonism which is never far below the surface when I talk with him surged into my throat and choked me. "Is that my fault?" I snapped. "Did I build it? Do I maintain it?"

"We're doing our best."

"Your best!" I shrugged derisively. I meant it as a careless gesture, to express my contempt of good intentions. I'd forgotten that it was a gesture now denied me. My body shrivelled with the pain, and the claws in my chest wrenching me upright in the bed. He hurried over to me and held me while the spasm lasted and for once there was infinite sadness in his eyes. It was the first time I had seen them so and their very nakedness warned me into silence. I closed my own, revelling in the strength

of his arms, wishing that he could have held me like that till the end and beyond.

"Now you see why you can't leave." His voice seemed to come from a long distance away. "There's a point at which human resistance fails. If you could only recuperate your strength in some way. As you are you won't survive another attack."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, and my own voice was thick with the pain.

"I think it's time that you faced the facts. Believe me, it isn't easy to tell you. They say a doctor should never give up hope. But what hope can I hold out?"

"Why are you telling me?"

"I'm not going to let you die alone like this."

Suddenly I knew what he wanted and I jerked myself free of his arms. I curse myself, even now, for ever believing him sympathetic. He would have held a dying dog as closely as he did me.

"I've asked you time and again not to interfere." My voice was sharp and brittle.

"You must let me be the judge now. In a month's time it will be too late."

"So? You only give me a month?"

"That's neither here nor there. I've let you have your own way till now. Perhaps I was wrong to pamper you like that." His voice was grey and heavy, like the air outside. "But now you can't escape the facts. It's unnatural to be alone like this. You've said so yourself."

"But I am alone. There is no one."

"You have a family, an elder brother."

"They think I'm dead already."

"Now you're lying."

"They hate me. They wouldn't come if I asked them."

"Have you asked them?"

"They'd only come to gloat and jeer. Do you know what it's like to be hated?"

"The ties of blood are of love not of hate."

I laughed. "But blood congeals so easily. You should know that. You're supposed to be a doctor. There's something in the blood which makes it clot when it's exposed to the air."

"That's what makes for healing."

"There's no healing without a wound, a scar."

"But the scar is part of the healing."

He didn't have the imagination to understand me or the subtlety to appreciate my mood. Whatever I have told him in the past it seems to have sufficed to have convinced him of my obstinacy. "Can't you find a way to forgive them? Now that the end is so near?"

I wanted to roar with laughter then. What does he know of my life to preach forgiveness? Can he piece my stray remarks together into the twisted, complex picture of my life? "So you only give me a month," I said; "can you give me the exact day?"

"You don't seem to understand just what that means."

"Considering it's my own life—" I broke off, suddenly catching his eyes on my little black box. I don't believe I have misjudged his interest in it and I am sure I can turn it to my own advantage. I might not have succeeded this morning but I still think that the little black box gives me a power which cannot be lightly dismissed. "Do you realise that the only interest they have in me today is what they can get out of that box? Do you realise that they are my legal heirs?" Watching his eyes clinging stubbornly to the little black box, my voice grew smooth and quiet. "They'd make damn' sure that I didn't make a will. They'd prevent me from giving the money to anyone else. I'm not poor. I have much to give. Would you

have it wasted on those who already have enough? Can you think of a way to put it to a nobler use?"

The silence that followed was full of possibilities; but then an expression came over his face that told me that my attempt had been mistimed if not misjudged. He shook his head and told me he was not responsible.

"What responsibility am I asking you to take? I pay you, don't I? Don't I pay enough? Do you want more? Or are you worried about the funeral? I shan't require a state funeral. A couple of dozen logs and a match-box will do and I'll see that you have the money to tie up all the ends, to knot and seal them if you like."

What use to recall the rest of my words? I was too blatant and his sense of duty was too strong. "It looks as if you're trying to bribe me," he said lightly and his eyes left the little black box.

He has given me an ultimatum. If the letter is not written by tomorrow afternoon he will write himself. "This has gone on long enough."

But I had the last word. As he turned toward the door I called out: "Don't worry, doctor. I'm not dead yet."

The woman must have been listening outside the door for she came in at once, a look of concern on her face. "I've been quarrelling with the doctor," I said in order to forestall her questions.

"He needs telling off," she answered. I don't know how much she heard but she fell in with my mood. "I'd like to tell him off myself." I asked her why and she told me that he has the reputation among the hospital servants of being too haughty and proud. He gives no one a second chance, accepts no excuses. "He thinks he's God Almighty," she said and I laughed at her then; and she joined in, pleased to have been able to soften my mood. I'm not really surprised that he isn't popular with his

staff. He will never lower that barrier, self-erected, self-maintained; he will never descend to pity. I haven't forgotten what happened to the sweeper. He was a foolish young man perhaps but brimming over with the eagerness of youth. The doctor caught him one night going into one of the women's wards and dismissed him without asking any questions. At the time I defended his action; it was only later that I discovered that the man had not been able to get another job because the doctor had sent him away without a recommendation. Perhaps he didn't deserve a recommendation but, knowing what conditions were like, the doctor should have relented. After all, one couldn't prove the man's intentions.

However, it's some consolation to me to know that I am not unique in my reactions to the doctor. The woman gives me the impression that she would rather see him humbled than triumphant. Well, so would I. He's too austere for my liking.

I'm evading the question. It's six hours since the doctor called and I've joked with the woman and dozed through the shadowless heat of the afternoon. I've even taken up my pen and written down the events of this morning and made sense of each sentence. But have I?

I am going to die. This is no transient illness. This is for ever. This is the end. I am going to die. I shall never leave this bed. I am going to die.

It doesn't make sense. There's no reality in these words. Death is rigidity, the stiffening of the limbs, the slackening of the muscles. Death is the rotting of the flesh and the stench of decay. Death is fear and the breathless gibberish of fear-driven confession. Death is dying, but dying is not for me. For me is the eternity of reproach, regret, remorse. How can I die when these are immortal?

My two brothers, two years my junior, died. They went

down to stay with grandmother during a summer holiday and were caught in the cholera epidemic of 1920. Cholera took them, not death; cholera preceded by the rising of a river and the flooding of its banks. I went down to that river ten years later and looked down at the black oozing slush which scarcely covered two inches of the bed. To me death seemed as unreal as the possibility of that slush becoming a raging torrent. There was so little movement there, only a still, thick slime which here and there vomited up black mounds of earth. Cholera was a natural aftermath of the floods.

I've forgotten the circumstances of my mother's passing. It was during term-time and when I returned there was nothing but an empty place where she had been. The empty rocking chair in the verandah which was always reserved for her, the empty peg in the hall where her shawl always used to hang.

Was it any different with my father? I had just succumbed to the first of my attacks and been sent to the hospital. When I came out there was another empty place, an accident with the car. They saved the chauffeur's life by amputating both his legs and he's still alive somewhere for my bank still continues to pay his pension. But of my father there was nothing but that emptiness, that hollow silence which takes possession of a house from which men have journeyed.

No, it wasn't the same with my father as it was with the others. I lost him on the morning that the ambulance came. That was death in life and the only reality is the reality which he bequeathed to me: the remorse and the reproach. But what does all this have to do with me now? The doctor is a fool, he's trying to frighten me, threaten me. It's part of his arrogance to believe me susceptible. Ill I might be, wretched with pain, but dying? No. The

doctor's not infallible, not God Almighty as the woman says. I will not accept his verdict.

I think we are going to have a storm tonight. The clouds are hanging so low that I feel I could reach out and touch them and the air is so thick with the threat of rain that it's torture to breathe. There's a patch of damp on my sheets, marking the outlines of my body, and the sweat clings to my skin. This page of my book is so smeared with the marks of my wet fingers that the writing is almost illegible. I don't know why I should care whether it is legible or not. There's no one to read.

I am not very sure that it will rain. The clouds seem to lift occasionally and at the moment I can see a jagged streak of black sky, spattered with a few stray stars. And, even as I write this sentence, the sky veils over again. That's the worst of storms of this kind. They are unseasonal and cruelly capricious. The heavy clouds promise rain and the earth heaves under their weight, but then suddenly, without reason, the clouds disappear and there's only that faint redolence of rain somewhere in the intangible distance.

# IV

IT did rain after all and the earth is still steaming from the after-effects of the storm. There's only one pleasant moment in a storm of this kind and that is the second when the rain first hits the earth. In that second, so evanescent, so fleeting, one gets the gentle, motherly scent of the earth-wet leaves, new earth and the crispness of rain that has come straight from the clouds. But the scent doesn't last; it's soon overpowered, drowned, by the cloying, nauseating stench of the downpour that follows. The water doesn't have time to soak into the earth before the heat draws it out again and it comes out with a sizzling and a sighing that is both mournful and somehow intensely irritating.

I didn't expect to sleep last night and yet I did and very deeply too. I fell asleep to the lullaby of the rain drumming on the corrugated iron roof of my room and carried that first sweet scent of rain with me into my dreams. When the woman woke me this morning the sun was already sharp and hot overhead and the sky was washed clean of any trace of cloud. The sad, steamy dampness in the air seemed somehow to match the mood in my heart for I woke with a sense of oppression: a stale, sour taste in my mouth and a feeling of anguish hovering somewhere on the fringe of my consciousness. I looked at the blackened teeth of the woman and remembered.

"We had a terrible storm last night," she said, pulling

back my sweat-sodden sheets. "It drove the animals out of the forest. The watchman says he saw some pug-marks around the hospital. He thinks it was a panther." Her eyes were large with repulsion, almost as if the beast had laid down with her.

"It's safe enough here," I said automatically.

"I don't like that forest. We live too close to it. Why couldn't they have built the hospital on the other side of the village, beside the main road? There's plenty of life there; but here! It's like the end of the world."

How right she is! The end of the world where nothing stirs. A careless phrase that strikes like a knife into my heart.

I made some attempt to disperse her fears. "Why, the watchman belches all through the night."

"When he's not asleep," she answered laconically. She's town-bred, my woman, and doesn't take kindly to the life here. It's a wonder to me that she's stayed with me for so long. Perhaps the bond between us stronger than I know.

I dismissed her as quickly as I could. There are moments when the mind shrinks from decision, when the sound of another's voice is torture. It was like that with me this morning. It is like that with me now.

The doctor has sent word that he will be late. He doesn't usually tell me when he's delayed, so this, I suppose, is his way of pressing the ultimatum home. He needn't have bothered. I believe him now. I woke with that consciousness, knowing it was I and not the doctor who was the liar. This room has that air of finality, crumbling, rotting, dying. That engulfing stream of the present which has so often threatened to choke me is itself a foretaste of things to come. Time has killed the past, has drawn the hand of oblivion over memory; but death

has slaughtered the future. If I could somehow project myself out of today I might find the strength to fight this vacuum that is in me. If I could step out of this bed and feel the weight of the earth on the soles of my feet. If I could draw my life forward into myself again.

The garden in front of our house had a heart-shaped lawn which divided the driveway into two. The grass in it was green only during the monsoons; during the rest of the year, however much the gardener tended it, it was a withered, parched brown. There never was enough water to keep the freshness of the green in that lawn. In May the trees flanking the driveway were a blaze of orange, and sometime during the year, I forget when, the creeper that clothed the compound walls would burst into yellow bloom.

The gardener was an erect young man who, for some undiscovered reason, always pinned a broken tiepin into the end of his turban, and the Arab watchman always brewed his coffee in the hour of twilight when outlines are lost in shadow. I shall never smell coffee without recalling his gaunt figure huddled over the little brazier in which the coals were a bright beacon of light.

There used to be a man who would come regularly to confer with father; a harmless enough creature but wearing trousers so full and baggy that we nicknamed him the Balloon. We used to be very adept, if somewhat unoriginal, in finding nicknames. Our ayah was immortalised as the Cabbage, for she appeared one day in a green satin blouse with so many frills on it that the analogy was obvious. And then there was Bootlace, a boy as thin and black as his nickname, and, of course, Old Whiskers.

I've forgotten what Old Whiskers looked like except that his face was as clean of hair as our heads were covered with it. It was something I believe to do with a disease he had in childhood, but children are ever cruel and we

never let him forget. In the end I think he grew reconciled to his nickname for there's one letter from him at the bottom of my little black box signed with that name. He played so important a part in my life that I feel I owe it to him to remember more about him. But he remains only a name.

I think we were very happy in those early days at home; at any rate I know it was a gracious time. Mother's gentle presence pervaded the house although I never remember her elsewhere than in the kitchen or in the verandah adjoining it, peeling the vegetables or watching the woman grind the spices. Father in those days was something like God, a power to be feared rather than a person to be loved. Our household was regulated by his hours and, whenever there was a carriage drawn up in the driveway, we five children had to lower our voices and retire into the courtyard at the back. I don't remember what we were like as children. I can only recall trivial incidents like the time I threw a stone over the mango tree and it fell on Sharada's head and drew a lot of blood. Or the time when I sniffed a camphor ball up my nose and the doctor had to come to extract it. And there was that magic day when Raj let me fly his big red kite for the first time. How wonderful it was to feel its soaring flight through the string that cut my finger!

And, of course, I doubt if I shall ever forget Nimi, a curly-headed youngster whose nose always wrinkled when she laughed. She used to play at hunting deer in the garden and the chauffeur and I always had to crawl about on all fours among the fruit trees while she stalked us with a bow and arrow in her little hands. Once she did succeed in hitting me in the arm but the pain was not great and it was bliss to feel her little body pressed against mine in apology, her lips caressing the wound.

I wish I were not alone. I wish some of the phantoms who inhabit my world would come forward out of the mist and give reality to this body of mine, to the fingers which hold this pen, to the thighs which support this paper. . . .

The doctor has just been in to see me and there's no concealing the triumph in his eyes. Damn him, how he enjoyed his triumph!

"Well?" he asked, "what have you decided?" It was cruel of him to pretend that I had a choice. One does not thrust a man up against death and then offer him a choice. Death has a power too hypnotic, too deadly.

"I haven't really been able to think about it," I returned, and, fortunately, my voice was under control. It made him hesitate and he eyed me from the foot of the bed as a hunter would his prey. "Don't you think I am serious?" I didn't answer. "I usually mean what I say." Still I didn't answer. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out an envelope. "All right, then," he sighed, "I might as well post this."

I didn't need to take the envelope in my hands to know to whom it was addressed. Once, in a moment of weakness, I had given him that address and by so doing had given him a weapon against which I had no defence.

He held the envelope out to me and I could see that he had misspelt the name of the street. I was on the point of telling him so when I caught the smile on his lips. Pitiless, cold, every crease on those lips told of triumph assured and accepted.

"If there's any writing to be done," I muttered sullenly, "I'll do it. I'm not illiterate."

"The bearer has to go down to the village at six. Will you have the letter ready by then?"

"The woman is quite capable of posting a letter."

"Nonetheless, I should prefer the bearer to take it down."

"Wouldn't you like to censor it first?"

For once he capped my sarcasm. "There's no need to waste a good envelope, particularly with paper the price it is. You can just as well use this one." Meticulously he drew the letter he had written out of the envelope and tore it into neat little shreds. I should have liked to have seen what he had written—I tried just now to piece the little pieces of paper together—but he is too thorough in all that he does.

I know I surrendered far too easily. I should have put up a better fight. But what is the use? He is stronger than I, steel against soap. How he must despise me! How he must laugh at my weakness! Does he really think that I am so warped and maimed that I do not understand what it is to die alone? Does he really believe me so full of hate that I have forgotten what it is to love?

"I think you're being unnecessarily melodramatic about all this," he said. "The worst that can happen is for your brother to refuse you an answer. And think how nice it will be to have someone of your own with you again."

I wasn't to be coaxed like a child. "Aren't you being melodramatic too? Was it necessary to tell me that my days were numbered? Is that your method of cure?"

I hurt him, as I intended. I know what hurts him; he has a brittle pride about his profession. He dropped his eyes. "Believe me, it wasn't easy. I didn't want to tell you. You dragged it out of me."

"Of course you're bound to say that. Tomorrow you'll tell me that it was my own idea to write. It's easy enough to distort the facts."

The envelope is on my table now and the doctor's writing on it cannot conceal the identity of the hand

within for I have surrendered so completely as to correct the spelling of the street. There it lies, a white square with precise edges, and it's all that I can do to restrain my hand from tearing it into pieces.

I don't want to do it. I don't want to do it. I am not ready. I don't know what the answer will be but I know a refusal will not be the worst. I know that as inexorably as I know that, within the hour, the bearer will knock on my door.

I have reached the parting of the ways and the moment will be marked by the disappearance of that envelope from my table. By letting it out of my sight I shall be opening the gates to the flood-tide of rendition but I have no case. I am not ready. I have done what the doctor told me to do but I am afraid, afraid as I have never been before. I cannot describe my fear; it is something nameless that has my heart in its grip, that makes me want to retch.

I am afraid of death's finality, of never being able to say: "Tomorrow I can try again." I am afraid of the way he will smile, of the look in his eyes when he knows what I have become. I am afraid to have them look upon my body once the life has left it. I am afraid to meet those who have already died.

My mother had a prayer room once. It was the smallest room in the house and was used for all sorts of odd purposes. She used to lock her jewels in a cupboard in a corner and I often saw the cook place the saucepan of milk on the window-ledge to save it from the dogs. I myself used to hide things there, the novels which I shouldn't read, the poems that I tried to write. None of this detracted from the quality or the spirit of that room. What is holiness, if not man-made sanctity, but the faith of the heart? Mother called this the quiet room and often

asked us to use it. To her, faith was peace and the only rule that she made was that we entered it unaccompanied. She herself visited it very regularly though I never knew what times she chose; but the evidence of her visits filled the room. There were two pictures in a corner, propped against the wall on a little marble-topped table scarcely a foot high. One was a brightly varnished picture of the goddess Saraswati, her feet planted somewhat precariously in a lotus. The other was a brown and faded photograph of grandfather, a picture taken many years before. There were always fresh flowers before these pictures and the incense which rose lazily from the holder on the marble-topped table permeated the room.

I ought to write about all this with contempt for I belong to the moderns who have learned ridicule as their fourth R. My mother's idols had four arms and swollen bellies; her gods were venal. How smoothly could I condemn! How rudely scorn to make my bargains! Now I must make another kind of bargain for my learning has emptied my heart of faith as my illness has drained the blood from my veins. I am a creature with a mind but without a soul. Would to God that I had an iota of her faith now!

# V

IT'S only three days since the letters were posted but I have an answer already. My aunt has arrived; without warning, of course, but then I've never known her to write. She always descends, a sudden cloud in a cloudless sky, forming from nothing, disappearing into nothing.

I wrote more than one letter. On an impulse which overtook me the moment the doctor's envelope passed from my hand to the bearer's, I wrote three other letters and gave them to the woman to post. I did it, if one must explain an impulse, because I hadn't yet accepted my surrender. If he was to be summoned then why not the others? If he was to witness my humiliation then why not the others? I would have written many more letters if there had been anyone to receive them.

I know the doctor will be angry with me for what I have done. He will look upon my aunt as an intruder and scold me for having summoned her; but I hope he can be made to understand what a pleasure it is to have her here. He was right when he said that one should not die alone. Man needs his fellows at the moment of departure.

She must have travelled on the night train for she arrived as the woman was washing me. The tonga drew up outside the verandah with a tinkling of bells and I heard her voice boom out across the space that separated us. "You fool, you've come round to the back of the

hospital." The driver muttered something and then she must have seen the woman through the wooden screen. "You there," she called, "come here."

There was something in the tone of my aunt's voice which made the woman pretend she had not heard. I could sense her suppressed indignation as she bent more studiously to the task of drying my legs, stopping only to pull the canvas screen about the bed.

"I said you," my aunt's voice thundered. She had apparently got out of the tonga and I could hear her rapping on the wooden screen. Still the woman did not respond, but by then my aunt had found the latch on the door and swung it open. "What's the matter with you? Are you deaf?" she asked, looming into view.

I couldn't resist a smile, even though I dislike being interrupted in the middle of my toilet. It was the same Aunt Ganga of our youth, impatient, outspoken and as untidy as ever. Her sari was badly crumpled, her hair once drawn tightly back from her forehead had already escaped most of its pins and she was wearing shoes that a mountaineer would have envied.

She showed no surprise at coming upon me so suddenly. Her own life has been such a disordered tangle that I think she's long been conditioned against the unexpected. The moment her eyes rested on me she forgot all about the woman and the tonga. "What's all this?" she asked, drawing up the empty chair. "What do you mean by saying that you're going to die? What sort of a man is this doctor to tell you that? Put some more powder there, no, under the knees you fool," she continued in the same breath; "don't you know that's one of the places they sweat the most?" Such was her spirit that the woman had no choice but to obey. "Well, I'm waiting," my aunt continued. "What's all this about?"

"You've come very quickly," I began. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"That's nothing." She waved my remark aside. She crouches rather than sits in a chair and I could not see her face properly for the hair which covered her cheeks. It was extraordinarily black, too black for a woman her age. "I was at a loose end when your letter arrived. It doesn't take me long to pack."

I told her as much as I could. How I'd had an attack on the train going up to the hills. How the woman, my present nurse, was on the platform and saw me through the window. How I woke to consciousness in this place. I spoke briefly but it didn't take my aunt long to pick up the threads and she grasped the most important point of the narrative straight away.

"So that's why you've kept her on," she said, eyeing the woman with ill-concealed dislike.

"Yes, and besides this place is short of staff."

"It's short of doctors too by the look of it. But that's no reason for having such an ugly-looking creature about."

"There's nothing wrong with her." I rose hotly to the woman's defence while she herself went calmly about her work. "She knows much more than all your starchy nurses."

"I'm sure she does." I didn't like the way she said that, more so since subtlety is not in her character.

Suddenly she jumped up and began to examine the array of bottles on my wash-stand. "Do you really take all these?" she asked.

"He brings those with the red labels with him," I began, and stopped, aghast at what I had said. My aunt would think me mad if she knew what I have often contemplated as I lay cheerless in my bed. Fortunately she didn't hear me, or missed the significance of the remark.

The woman entered with my tray, and my aunt's mind, mercurial as ever, had already shifted to the subject of diet. She began to question the woman and went into the inner room with her and I could hear her explaining that honey had far greater strengthening properties than sugar.

I listened to the tenor of their voices in the inner room, my aunt assertive, the woman laconic, and a sudden feeling of pleasure flooded through me. My aunt seemed to have brought a freshness into the room, a vital and vivid energy. I looked around the room and wondered in what way it had changed, for changed I knew it had. Everything was the same and yet the sound of a new voice could give it a different air. I was so glad to see her, and my pleasure, heightened by the unexpectedness of her arrival, was already reaching into the future. I was going to enjoy her first meeting with the doctor and my nights would never be lonely again.

The tonga driver interrupted my thoughts. He must have been waiting for well over half an hour and impatience made his voice aggressive. How long was he to wait, he asked, rattling the verandah screen; he had a living to make and couldn't stand about all day.

"Oh, my goodness," said my aunt, coming back into the room again, "I'd forgotten all about him. But what's he so impatient about? He'll get enough on this fare to drown himself in drink." She didn't seem to care whether he heard her or not. "I don't know what's happened to people nowadays. They can't live without it." She said this with a twinkle in her eyes and I would gladly have shared her joke if the man had not been so impatient. I suppose he had every right to complain but I scarcely expected events to take the turn they did.

The screen around my bed hid him from me but he was as aware of my presence as I was of his. At first both

of them, my aunt included, started a slanging match which somehow seemed to be directed at me. I was the spectator to whom each appealed and it might have been comic were it not that I dislike scenes.

He might be a poor man, he shouted, but that didn't give her the right to insult him. Why hadn't he done his job properly, she returned; it wasn't her fault that he had driven her round to the back of the hospital. But he'd found the right place. That had nothing to do with it; she had engaged him and he must wait until he was discharged. If that's how it was, he muttered, rattling the wooden screen until I thought it would break from its hinges, she'd have to pay for waiting time. Ridiculous, she laughed, that wasn't the agreement.

"Oh for God's sake!" I cried when I could stand it no longer. "Pay him and be done with it."

So much for my intervention. At once, the man sensed sympathy from me and broke into a fresh torrent of words, the gist of which seemed to be that if it weren't for me he would be free to go. I lost my temper then; particularly when I saw my aunt sit down in the chair as unconcernedly as if she had nothing to do with it at all.

"Shut your dirty mouth," I ended, "and tell me what the fare is."

"Five rupees," he answered promptly, his voice smooth. I looked meaningfully at my aunt and she began to fumble in the neck of her blouse. "That's too much," she muttered, "we settled for three."

"Does that matter?" I retorted. "Pay him and be done with it."

It was the tonga driver's turn to withdraw. There wasn't a sound from him as my aunt and I argued about the fare.

I wish to heaven I hadn't interfered, for in the end it was I who had to pay the man and send him on his way. My aunt didn't have the change. She brandished a hundred rupee note in front of me and I had to count out the money from my purse. That ruined any pleasure I might have had in seeing her. So fragile are the heart's emotions, so delicate their hold. So was my pleasure killed—by five pieces of silver.

No, perhaps I am wrong to say that. I mustn't jump to too hasty conclusions with her. She might prove to be the only one on my side. She didn't have the change and tonga drivers always haggle about fares. But she might have spared me the humiliation of that scene. She herself was quite unperturbed but she should have guessed how much such scenes take out of me.

She's gone to find the doctor now and I wonder what they are saying to each other. I wish I was present at their meeting; she won't take long to prick his bubble of arrogance and I would give much to see it done.

I must admit that I am wonderfully content to know that she is here. The incident of the tonga driver is already forgotten and already my mind has reached into the future. What matter if the others don't answer?

It was generous of her to accept me as I am. She could so easily have reproached me or reminded me. My life is a chronicle of blunders and failures and the world does not lack for Jeremiahs and prophets of doom. The others would have jeered at my shrivelled body and told me that I deserved no better. They would have laughed and derided my weakness for the strength that I once possessed. Your day of judgment is at hand; you must reap what you have sown; the account must be paid; our language is rich in such phrases, facile to the tongue, empty of meaning. They can never express the weight of the past,

the oppression of memory. They can never balance the account.

Once I thought they could. Once, I myself was a prophet and foretold my retribution. Once, it was all so clear. Now the living of each day has blurred the clarity of my vision and I know nothing for an elemental truth. I know nothing. I am certain of nothing. Perhaps I have travelled beyond my years. Perhaps I am already one with those that have been. In the life-span that is allotted to us clarity and certainty recede with the fulfilment of time, as does perhaps the outer world to the convict serving a life-sentence. This bed is my prison and the empty plain my prison walls; what should I remember of the years that have been?

I think my aunt has been generous; I think she shows more magnanimity than I deserve. Admittedly she used to visit us quite often when we were young but we had no claims on each other. She was never any more than a stranger to us; and I personally had no particular liking for her. And yet she has chosen to answer my letter, chosen to sacrifice her time for me. We can live out the rest of my life together, complete strangers but for the tie of blood which binds us; and never was I more grateful for a tie which I had hitherto believed too fragile for human hands. Yes, in the clarity of this drowsy forenoon I can admit, with absolute confidence, that I am glad I wrote more than one letter.

# VI

I'VE had a perfectly hideous night but thank God the doctor has returned. I had given up all hope of seeing him today when I suddenly heard his voice in the inner room. The first impact of recognition was joyful but when I began to analyse his mood I found nothing in it to console me. His tone was brittle and, as he surveyed me from the doorway, there was such contempt in the arch of his eyebrows that I writhed within myself.

"Is this woman your aunt?" he enquired, wasting no time on preliminaries.

I nodded wordlessly.

"Did you write to her?" I nodded again. "When?" I told him. "In future if you have any letters to post you will kindly give them to me."

"But you told me I should not be alone." I tried to defend myself although there was no conviction in my voice. "You made me write."

"I didn't ask you to invite all your friends and relations here. This is a hospital and not a dak bungalow. I will not have the place turned upside down to suit you."

"But she did come to look for you. She wouldn't have done it if you'd been here. You shouldn't have gone to Malegaon yesterday."

"That's my concern," he said grimly.

"Your duty is to this hospital," I answered sullenly. "Everything would have been all right if you'd been here."

He seemed to close up against me. "Kindly allow me to be the arbiter of my own duty." His eyes examined the disorder in the room and there was infinite disdain in his voice when he spoke again. "You can do as you like in your own home. Your personal standards of behaviour do not concern me. But I will not have you treat this hospital as a poor-house." He called in the woman and ordered her to move the bed and the suitcase. Some of my aunt's clothes were lying across a chair and, as if to give emphasis to his words, he flicked them off on to the floor and pulled the chair back into position.

"Where is your aunt?" he asked, moving across to the wash-stand. Her comb was lying among the bottles and his lips curled as he picked it up with the tips of his fingers and dropped it into the woman's waiting hands.

"She said she was going down to the village," I answered meekly, the fight drained out of me.

"I'll see her down there." He came across to stand in his accustomed place at the foot of my bed. "How many letters did you write?" he asked. Something in his eyes forced me to tell the truth. "Fortunately we have some empty rooms but it will be a tight fit if they all decide to come. It won't be very comfortable for them either, but if this is the standard they are used to I doubt if they'll have any objections. I'm afraid, however, that you'll have to pay according to the hospital rates. We have no provision for visitors."

"But you can't do that," I protested.

He smiled that cold smile of his. "Do you really expect them to herd together in this one room? I thought you'd progressed beyond that level of civilisation."

If I know what hurts him, he in his turn knows very well what hurts me. It was cruel of him to compare me with his other patients, malicious of him to have suggested

that I expected my visitors to stay with me in this one room. "I didn't ask her to stay here," I said sullenly. "She didn't ask my permission."

"Then perhaps you're worried about the cost," he pursued relentlessly. "It shouldn't break you."

"Am I such a miser in your eyes?" I asked.

He smiled again. "You must forgive me if I taunt you but I had expected something better from you."

"But it's not my fault. I didn't ask her to stay here. I didn't think she'd behave like that."

"She is your aunt."

"But I haven't seen her for years. I don't care if I don't see her again."

"You should have thought of all this before you wrote those letters." He paused. "It's a pity that you let your temper get the better of you, but it's too late to repent now. You'll have to take what comes."

"I'm not trying to shirk my responsibilities," I returned hotly. "I can cope with them all."

"Can you?" he asked softly, his eyes sharp with mockery.

How well he knows my weaknesses! How shrewdly has he judged me! He knows that he is the only one who can send my aunt away; he knows how impatiently I awaited his return. How contemptible I must appear in his eyes! Perhaps I should resent his contempt, defend myself against his scorn; but I cannot bear another night like the last. The coward in me shrinks from this and I must bear the insolence of his eyes because of that.

So much has happened within these past twenty-four hours that I wonder that I could ever have written that I was pleased to see my aunt. I should have taken my cue from the way she made me pay for the tonga. I should have learned my lesson from past experiences. One can't

draw a blind over the past and pretend that it has no bearing on the present. One can't ignore the past when we ourselves are what the past has made us.

But I'll make the doctor pay for his attitude. He can't treat me as he did and expect me to forget or forgive. I am not a servant to be whipped into submission. I am not a slave to his moods. Does he think he can frighten me by threatening to make me pay the bill? There's no law that can force me to pay. Does he think I care whether they stay or not? I spoke the truth when I told him that he should not have left the hospital alone as he did. He had no business to leave me. I don't know what called him to Malegaon so urgently; this makes it twice in one week that he has been there; the woman says that a message came for him early in the morning but however urgent the call his first responsibility is here. If he continues to show contempt I'll tell him so. I don't pay him to attend patients in Malegaon.

He left early in the morning, about the same time as my aunt arrived. My aunt herself returned at lunch-time from her tour of the hospital, announcing to all within earshot that the hospital was in a dreadful condition. She didn't tell me just what she'd found to disparage, but after lunch I was to learn what she'd been about.

Till then I don't think her manner had annoyed me at all. I looked upon her as I would a child, fondly excusing her clumsiness with the thought that here at last I had found a companion. Just what this companionship entailed I was not to discover until after lunch but, till then, I laughed away the ink that she spilled over my sheets and the newspapers that she crumpled into shreds.

As soon as the woman had cleared away the lunch tray a man I'd never seen before appeared with a bed and set it up in the verandah where the blinds had already been

drawn down against the afternoon's sunshine. He returned very soon with sheets and a pillow and presented a chit for me to sign: "Received one bed, two sheets, one pillow, one pillow-case." That wasn't the last of him, for my aunt suddenly decided that she wouldn't sleep with her head to the south and there was a great deal of noisy discussion while they debated in which direction due south lay. As it happened, the only position that seemed to suit my aunt was the one in which my bed stood and my bed had consequently to be moved.

Almost immediately the clerk of the hospital knocked on the door. He didn't enter but shouted from outside that there was no honey in the store but if I would give him the money he would send down to the village for some. As I counted out the money my aunt told him to send for some asafoetida as well. "I can't digest my food without," she explained.

Then a little boy pushed his way in through the verandah and stood gaping at me through the window. He'd been summoned to press my aunt's legs, but as he jabbed desultorily at her as she lay on the bed he couldn't keep his eyes away from me. He could have been one of the two I had driven from me a little while ago.

"What the devil are you staring at?" I asked, unable to bear his eyes upon me. He didn't answer but looked hastily away; only to return to me again when he thought I wasn't looking. "What's the matter?" I asked again. "Have I got two heads or something?"

My aunt stirred sleepily on the bed. "Why can't you leave the child alone? He's doing you no harm."

"Why the devil must he stare at me then?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake," she murmured, "can't you let a person sleep?"

I opened my eyes after a brief uneasy sleep to the sound

of my aunt's voice booming out another order. At first I could not keep my lids open, so dazzling was the light in the room. She had drawn up the blinds and was combing her hair in the sunshine. I protested drowsily, saying that it was too early to draw up the blinds.

"Rubbish," she retorted. "You need the fresh air. How do you expect to get better, cooped up in the dark like that?"

I thought I'd reached the end of my tether when the woman brought in my tea tray. There was no tea there; just some hot milk so sweetened with honey that it made me sick to drink it. "Never mind," said my aunt, watching the woman clean the mess off the floor, "you'll get used to it. It's good for you."

But worse, far worse, was to come. I think I would have borne everything for the hope that she held out to me. The upsetting of my quiet routine, the continuous booming of her voice, the staring curiosity of little boys—all these, I told myself, were but a small sacrifice against what she had to offer me. But the climax was shattering, unbearable. It came at six o'clock.

By then my aunt seemed to have settled down for a while. She was crouched in the chair thumbing through some magazines but, for all her absorption, she seemed to be watching the woman, seemed to sense that she was preparing to go out. When the woman brought the glass of water to my bedside, her last action before leaving, my aunt lifted her eyes suddenly from the papers and barked: "Where do you think you are going?"

Till then my woman had shown no reaction whatsoever. She'd gone about her work as coolly detached as only she knows how, answering only when directly addressed, obeying if there was no alternative. Now, when confronted directly by my aunt, she curled up like a

porcupine, her muscles tense, her temper bristling. "That's my business," she answered curtly, and turned away.

"Oh, I know you go down to the toddy shop," my aunt called her back. "The whole village talks about it. Aren't you ashamed to leave your patient alone like that? Where do you get the money from?"

I gasped in dismay. That was one thing we never mentioned. The result was a foregone conclusion. Without a word the woman went into the inner room and I could hear her packing her things. Admittedly she made more noise than was necessary but that was her cue to me. "How could you?" I murmured, wondering what to do.

"Why are you standing up for her? Hasn't she any sense of shame? Let her go."

"But you don't understand. She does everything for me."

"As long as she can have her own way."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I can't let her go like this."

"Why not? I'm here to look after you now."

She shouldn't have said that. Till then I might perhaps have done nothing to call the woman's bluff, for bluff I know it was; but the prospect of a future filled entirely by this untidy woman who was my aunt—milk with honey, warm baths, urchins with staring eyes—loosened my tongue and I turned sharply on her. "Who the devil asked you to interfere?" I exploded. "Sailing in here like an angel of mercy, disorganising everything. Haven't I been able to look after myself so far? Do you think the world comes to an end when you are not around?"

She laughed. "If that's what you call living."

"Your concern for me hasn't stopped you looking after yourself, has it? You've made yourself very comfortable,

haven't you? Are you sure you wouldn't like a foot-rest?"

That was the beginning of the end. It wouldn't have been in character if I hadn't been able to taunt my aunt into losing her temper. After all, I've done it so often before, I should know how. She stood up. "Is this what I get for leaving everything and coming straight here in answer to your letter? Is this the thanks I get for trying to help? You've always been an obstinate girl, Sarala, but now I know they are right when they say you've no heart. You're as selfish as they come."

"Selfish, am I?" I retorted, stung by her reference to the others. "What about you? What have you done for me? You haven't come near me so far but now that you think I am going to die you break your neck getting here. What do you think you're going to get? A share of the fortune?"

Involuntarily her eyes strayed to the little black box under my bed and she laughed, a harsh brittle laugh. "My dear child. I've managed for so long on less than nothing that I wouldn't know what to do with the money if I had it."

"You see," I said triumphantly, "you do expect something. You might pretend that you don't care but you are all the same. All you ever wanted from me was money."

"And what else did you have to give?" she asked, her eyes scathing. "Did you have any love or respect for me? Did you ever care what happened to me? Oh, no; I was just the half-crazed aunt whom you were all rather ashamed of."

"I was not your keeper."

"No? Do I have no claim as your father's sister? Then why should you want my help now? Are you so afraid of being alone?"

"I didn't want to write to you. The doctor made me."

"And you should be down on your knees to thank me for coming."

It was my turn to laugh. "What else should I be down on my knees for? If you want gratitude you must earn it." I didn't care what words I used; the clatter from the inner room drove me beyond reason. "Are your affairs my responsibility? I'm not a charitable institution."

"May God forgive you," she said, suddenly quiet, and something in my heart stirred at the quietness in her voice. "You have neither heart nor soul. Thank God your father is not alive to see what a child he has conceived. May God forgive you."

"I don't want your intercession," I said roughly. "I've done very well without. You can keep your prayers for those who need them."

She clapped her hands over her mouth. "To talk like that!" she breathed. "I never believed them when they told me what you had become. It was incredible to believe. But now! I don't know what to think."

Fortunately the woman came into the room at that moment and prevented me from saying any more. She's clever my woman, too clever for me. She brought her bundle with her and dropped it on the floor beside the bed. There was something hard in it which rang metallically against the stone floor. "I don't want you to quarrel over me," she said and there was a message in her eyes which appalled me. I realised suddenly what it would mean to be without her and, recalling all that she did for me, was dumb with apprehension. I think I would have grovelled before her, and only those who have been abandoned as I have been will know the pain that flooded through me at the sight of that bundle which she threw down beside me. It was a dirty, shapeless thing with an

enormous bulge at one end, but it symbolised my need for her.

"Don't talk rubbish," said my aunt, who at least was not at a loss for words. "This has nothing to do with you at all."

In the end the woman went to the toddy shop but left the bundle where it lay and whenever my eyes rested on it the tears stung my lids.

My aunt and I didn't speak a word to each other for the rest of the evening. She busied herself with the papers, and I, who only a short time before had savoured the pleasure of her company, now found only bitterness in it. Already we had reached that barrier of silence beyond which there was neither explanation nor understanding.

I watched her graceless movements, the way she pursed her lips into an ugly funnel of flesh, the way her fingers seemed to hang boneless from her wrists, and I loathed everything about her, even the creak of her chair as she moved in it. Was she to stay with me until I died, probing into my most precious secrets, reorganising my life with her clumsy hands? Was I to surrender myself to her merely because of a sudden impulse to write a letter? All my resentment and my anger were in my eyes if she had but lifted her own to look.

I lay sleepless throughout the night, the thoughts forming demented patterns in my brain; and the sight of that figure in the other bed filled me with such hate that I had to stuff the sheet into my mouth to prevent myself from crying out.

My temperature rose by the morning but, thank God, the woman was still with me. Even now, my head feels thickly heavy and there's a jagged pain between my eyes and a stiffness at the back of my neck. But there's only one bed on the verandah and the woman will soon be here to turn down the light.

## VII

THEY are gathering like vultures for the kill. I would never have believed it possible for them to have answered me so quickly but they are here already, drawn by the smell of death.

Sharada and Malini arrived this morning. The doctor must have told them something about my fever for they sent word jointly that I was not to trouble with them until I was feeling perfectly fit. The message must have been Malini's idea, for Sharada would never be so attentive to my moods; but I have taken them at their word and refused to see them. It will not hurt them to wait.

The doctor has made out a schedule for me in which there are two visiting hours: 11 to 12 in the morning and 5.30 to 6.30 in the evening. He pretended that he had made this schedule to suit my convenience but I know perfectly well that he has made it to suit himself. It's his gesture to show me that the discipline of the hospital depends on him.

This morning he seemed to have forgotten about yesterday; or at least seemed to prefer to ignore it. But he couldn't hide the disapproval in his eyes.

"I can't understand what made you write those letters."

"You told me to," I answered.

"Aren't you exaggerating? I see there's no answer from your brother as yet."

That touched me on the raw but I tried to treat it

carelessly. "Does it matter who comes? You told me I should not be alone."

He smiled disbelievingly. "Does that mean that you should now refuse to see them?"

"But I'm not in the mood. I've still got a terrible headache."

"Your pulse is all right," he said, "and you've got quite a fresh colour on your cheeks." The tone of his voice confirmed his disbelief. "Never mind," he said, "perhaps you'll feel better tomorrow."

He doesn't understand why it is that I cherish my privacy. He despises me, I think, for refusing to see them. In his rigid standard of morality there are no barriers between those born from the same womb. I should have liked to have told him why I was reluctant to see the others: the experience with my aunt has made me cautious and I dare not risk a second disappointment. My heart is too fragile to withstand another rebuff. But I doubt if he would understand me. He has never made any attempt to understand me. He has always set his rigid code of behaviour before me and I must accept it without question. Sometimes I want to rebel against him, to force him to accept my point of view; but the effort would be futile. It would only confirm him in his belief that I am sick in mind as well as in body.

Anyway, I still have the woman and it has been much easier than I expected to reach an understanding with her. I thought I would have to apologise, for instance, for my aunt's accusations. I admit that she couldn't say anything while the fever was on me but her hands during that time were more than gentle and she returned that night within the hour and completely sober. My aunt would say it was because she was afraid but I know better. She didn't want to leave me alone with the intruder. Since my aunt was

to sleep on the verandah she stretched herself out on the floor between our beds and was as wakeful as I was.

I showed her the doctor's schedule and told her that it would necessitate her staying on for another thirty minutes. "But you needn't hurry to come back," I added quickly.

"More likely an hour. I shall have to tidy up after they leave." There was infinite contempt in her voice.

"Well. An hour then. Will that be all right?"

"It'll have to be. I'm not leaving you alone with them."

"Have you seen them?" I asked, knowing very well that she had both seen and studied them.

"I have." She drew herself up, insolently mimicking Sharada's manner. "So much powder and paint. You can smell them a mile away."

"Well?" I prompted, enjoying the mimicry.

"I shouldn't like to get on the wrong side of the taller one, if that's your sister."

How right she was! Sharada, ten years my senior, was the terror of our home. She had married and left by the time I returned from school, but her annual visits used to set everyone's nerves on edge. Father used to say it was because she was childless.

"She ought to have a couple of dozen children. That'll put her right," said the woman, following my thoughts so closely that I wonder if I heard her aright.

"How's the boy?" I asked on a sudden impulse, remembering that we hadn't spoken of him for some time. Her son must be old enough to be my father but we never speak of him otherwise than as the boy.

She sighed. "Who would have children? You'd think he'd be able to keep me now, with me a widow and he my only son. But no, he's always in debt, always asking for money. It's those women," she added darkly.

"Don't tell me you send him money?" I teased. "He must be earning twice as much as you."

She looked at me strangely. "What else can I do?"

"But where do you get it from?"

"There's always the money-lender."

When I realised that she was serious I was so shocked that I could only stare at her. What is this bond that's rooted in the womb? How fragile can it be and yet how all-enduring? What claim had the boy on this woman now, he who has twice her youth and six times her strength? There should be a natural law that severs the bond as the umbilical cord is severed.

"Now you're being ridiculous," I said at last; "the boy is old enough to look after himself."

She sighed again. "That's what I tell him. But I can't refuse my own son. He is all that I have. But come now, I don't want to burden you with my troubles. You've enough of your own." She moved briskly about the room and the matter might have ended there but my indignation refused to die.

"Have you ever worked out what interest they charge?" I asked.

She smiled deprecatingly. "But is there anyone else so ready to help?"

"Of course there is. Fetch me the box."

It hadn't taken me long to make up my mind for I was determined to save her from the clutches of the money-lender. Every village, however small, boasts one, and I've read enough about them to loathe the sound of their name. I've never had any patience with middle-men and to me they are the lowest of their kind.

She didn't protest but seemed to move reluctantly to obey me, lifting the little black box on to the bed. I made it quite clear to her that I had no intention of giving her

the money as a gift; she could repay me from her salary, but at least I would charge no interest. And I made it a condition of the loan that she did not go near the money-lender again. She agreed and when she actually saw the money in my hand the tears filled her eyes. "God bless you," she said, touching my feet with her hands, "God bless you."

I know my aunt would dismiss all this as shrewd hypocrisy. To her it would be just another example of the way the woman has gained the upper hand over me. "You've bribed her to stay," she'll say. She doesn't understand what it is to be in a money-lender's clutches, she doesn't know what the sight of that woman's tears did to me.

I've not been altogether impetuous. My decision might have been impulsive but where money is concerned I've learned to think clearly. I insisted on getting a receipt for the money and she returned with it this afternoon. She hadn't lied either about the sum or the man's name. Every time I look at his signature on the scrap of paper I am filled with a sense of loathing.

I took the opportunity, while the box was on my bed, of running through its contents. The woman knows her duty very well; before I had reached for the key around my neck she had left the room and closed the door behind her, the only time that the door to the inner room is ever closed.

I had intended to make up my accounts, for the end of the month is drawing near and the doctor will have to be paid. But somehow, with the book in my hand, I could not find the energy to turn the pages. There's always tomorrow, I thought, laying it aside. I didn't care to glance at the papers either; I know the contents of them all by heart, even to the punctuation marks on that

yellowing sheet whose paper has begun to crack at the folds.

In the end I did no more than count out the money and try on the gold bangles which lay in a blue velvet box near the bottom. Jewels delight me and I've often idled away my time by trying on those that I own. I love the smooth weight of gold, and the pure lustre of pearls is one of the most beautiful sights that I know.

The bangles had been made for me and should have fitted tightly about my wrists. But now they are so loose that I only have to lift my arms for them to roll down and settle into the armpits. It wasn't a good idea to try them on. I don't need visible proof of the flesh that I have lost.

# VIII

THE woman was late last night, later than usual. She stood hiccuping in the doorway and there was such a loathsome smirk on her face that I was filled with disgust and reached out to turn down the light myself. I would have slept without taking the milk that she offered but I was hungry. She had spilt much of it into the saucer and, as she stood steadyng herself against the bed, the fumes of toddy from her breath mingled with the steam from my cup.

This morning she had the grace to be ashamed but when I asked her where she got the money from she grew stubborn. Couldn't she do as she liked with her wages? They were little enough as it was. "They'll be even less next month," I snapped.

That put an end to any further argument but I can't rid myself of the impression that she believes that I will either forget or excuse her that sum. She should know me well enough to realise that I won't do either; but what is there at the back of her mind to give her that hope? What have I said to make her so sure?

Is it any wonder that I am feeling sick at heart again? Aunt Ganga accused me of being selfish and heartless, as they have all done; but I am not so. I want to give, to share. Is it my fault if the giving turns sour? What else could I have done?

Nothing else has happened today. The doctor's visit

passed in eventless silence. He seemed preoccupied and disturbed; his eyes were vacant and he had to look twice at his thermometer before the reading registered on his mind. I thought at first that his preoccupation had something to do with my visitors. Sharada could so easily have provoked him, but the woman tells me that he scarcely speaks to them at all. He's out most of the day, and in the evenings he locks himself in his room where they cannot reach him. "The taller one has tried to speak to him," she said, "but he always manages to get away quickly."

That's typical of Sharada. Since I have refused to see her again she must be kicking with impatience and curiosity and since the doctor is her only contact with me she will naturally try to pump him. I'm glad he snubbed her.

I wonder then what it is that has disturbed the doctor? The woman doesn't know herself and I must conjecture what I will. I know something is worrying him; he is usually meticulous with his examination. I wonder what it could be: something in the hospital? A letter from someone? It's at moments such as this that I realise how little I really know about him. I've seen him every day for eight months now, but he remains a stranger.

No one else has arrived. I had expected an answer from my brother by now but it seems that he will neither come nor write. I don't know whether I am glad or disappointed. Perhaps I'm a fool to expect an answer. Perhaps my imagination has cherished a bond between us which no longer exists. Perhaps I've so lost touch with reality that I have forgotten why he should come. At the moment, it doesn't seem to matter.

I'm afraid my routine is catching up with me again and there's nothing to my life but a drunken woman swaying in a doorway. All day long the sun has shone from a sky

of shimmering steel. Now it reaches heavily towards the horizon, a disc of polished metal against a grey vacuum, a swift-moving shadow in an empty sky. A column of smoke rises from the edge of the forest, sharply white, curving gently to an imperceptible breeze. Some strangers perhaps camping for the night beside a forest no locals will dare approach.

I can't get the legend about the forest out of my mind today. I don't like to think about it for fear of what my imagination will do in the hours of darkness; but today I cannot ignore it. That forest holds in its black depths the tormented soul of an ascetic who broke his vows. Travellers have seen him, have heard his anguished cries. It is his failure which keeps that forest inviolate, for, it is said, whoever sees or hears him does not live to see the sun rise over a new day.

It is a legend which somehow twists my heart.

There's no sound to disturb this silent evening. A little while ago I could hear a child whimpering but now even my clock has stopped. I've no heart to wind it, no heart to write; there's nothing to say. I have no will to live.

# IX

I WOKE this morning with a tremendous sense of expectation. I wanted to laugh and clap my hands for joy. It was almost like old times again. There was the woman with a cup of tea in her hand and she could almost have been my ayah at home, so unlike a patient did I feel. What resilience did I have in those days, how hard did expectation die ! If not the post then a telephone call or a man cycling up the drive with a letter in his hand. Something was bound to happen. I had to learn that hope can kill but how stubborn was the dying ! It was the same with me this morning except that the birth and the dying were simultaneous. I only had to stretch out my hand for the cup to know that nothing was going to happen.

And yet the feeling of lightness remained. When the woman went out of the room I tried to sit up and, impossible to believe, did so quite smoothly without effort or assistance. I even managed to turn and push the pillows up into a rest for my back. This so emboldened me that I thought I'd try myself further. I pushed back the sheet and swung my legs off the bed and just managed to touch the floor with my toes.

How prosaic the achievement looks on paper ! An idle, unthinking message to my muscles and a response so shattering that it turns my head giddy to think what it could mean. The touch of the cold stone beneath my toes was electric and my body could not sustain the shock.

I jerked myself back into bed again, my limbs trembling.

The woman noticed the disordered pillows and asked suspiciously what I had been doing, but I told her that there was an itch in my back and she turned me over solicitously to scratch it. It was when my face was pressed into the pillows, to hide the smile that lit it, that I understood what I had done. It was as if life had come surging back into my body again and the throbbing impact of it gave me a clarity of vision that prophets must have in their moments of grace. I dare not take this vision too seriously, but I am conscious of the power in me if ever I can leave this bed.

I asked to see my visitors today but before I sent for them I made quite sure that I was ready to receive. I made the woman dress me in my white lace nightgown and I asked for powder and lipstick. My hands were shaking too much to apply them properly and I know the result was none too pleasing, almost bizarre. I would have wiped it all off again if it were not that I heard their steps on the path outside. I hurriedly made the woman draw down the blinds and awaited my visitors in a darkened room, drawing some consolation from the fact that they wouldn't be able to see me very clearly.

My consolation was short-lived. I ought to explain that there is a path to the other wards which passes my verandah. They used it this morning and whenever I think of what I overheard the blood mounts to my cheek—but no, let me first recall the words we spoke to each other.

I wasn't able to make out their features in the curtained gloom but they brought the feel of a long-forgotten world into the room with them. Perfume thick and heavy, rustling silks, tinkling bracelets: there was something so

incongruous about them. It put me on the defensive; I became brisk and boisterous and that too was out of character.

"How nice of you to come. I'm sorry I've not been able to see you before but doctor's orders, you know." They edged around the bed and pulled the chairs back from where I had ordered them placed. They seemed extremely cautious and I wondered if the doctor had warned them against touching anything in the room or getting too close.

Malini is the quicker of the two and she was the first to speak. "We could scarcely believe your letter. Why didn't you write before? The doctor says you've been here for months."

"Eight months to be precise," I answered curtly, unwilling to listen to her reproaches.

"You can't imagine the shock it was. A letter out of the blue like that."

"It was something of a shock to me too, but don't let's talk about that. When did my letter arrive?"

"On Tuesday. We left on Saturday but missed a connection at the junction and had to spend twenty-four hours at the station. We came as soon as we could."

Already I was beginning to hate her use of the plural, the way she always linked her name with Sharada's. Once that plural had included me, not Sharada. Once she would have come to me without waiting for Sharada. "You shouldn't have hurried." The sarcasm was somewhat clumsy but Sharada, never very subtle herself, reacted as I knew she would.

"You didn't expect us to drop everything? After the way you've treated us?" I heard her voice, gruff and petulant, speak for the first time with something that was almost shock; it brought back so many memories.

"Of course not," I countered, sugar in my own. "I ought to be grateful that you are here at all." I turned back to Malini, rather enjoying her discomfiture. "I hope you're comfortable here? I'm afraid this place hasn't much to commend it."

"But of course," Malini's voice sounded a jarring note. "The doctor's been very kind."

"Perhaps he's glad of the company," I said nastily. I didn't know what else to say and we relapsed into an uncomfortable silence in which the creaking of Malini's chair sounded like the staccato of a machine gun. Sharada sat unmoving.

"Have you seen the papers?" I asked at last. "The war seems to be going very well." I don't know what prompted that remark; it was an inane thing to say but it had its effect.

"Well I'm damned," Sharada burst out. "We haven't come all this way to discuss the war."

"Why have you come?" I took her up so quickly that any discerning person would have known that I was baiting her. Malini knew. Sharada, in her own unimaginative way, took the question at its face value.

"Because you wrote to us."

"Then perhaps I sent for you to discuss the war. There's so little company around here."

She stood up and Malini's chair staccatoed uneasily. "This is too much. We've spent four miserable days here, sweating it out and kicking our heels—"

"I'm sorry it's been so hot," I interrupted.

"I wasn't complaining about the heat. If you'd only stop trying to be clever. It's quite obvious you haven't changed."

"Did you really expect any change? After all, you'd assessed the latent evil in me a long time ago. Would you have your judgment proved wrong?"

"Oh, please," Malini intervened. The role of peace-maker fell naturally about her shoulders and, even after so many years, she had not lost her touch. In pacifying Sharada, however, she moved farther away from me. That too was not unexpected and yet I felt unaccountably disappointed. I don't know why I should have looked for any change in her. Our interview was running its course in a well-worn groove and none of us had the power to shift the needle. Three immutable substances, in whatever combination, we produced the same inevitable result: an explosion delayed by Malini's valiant but vain efforts.

"We've seen Aunt Ganga," Malini said when Sharada had been persuaded to sit down again.

"She arrived two or three days before you."

With her faithful confederate ranged beside her Sharada took up the cudgels again. Why had I sent for Aunt Ganga? Why couldn't she behave properly? The whole hospital was talking about her. It was so humiliating. I asked what Aunt Ganga had done and was regaled with a long list of typically aunt-like but highly unconventional incidents. She hadn't slept in the hospital for two nights, she'd been seen outside the toddy shop, Sharada herself had seen her squatting by the village well.

"She's done nothing wrong," I argued; "there's no law against that."

"You would stand up for her. What do you think I felt like when she called out to me to join her?"

I felt sorry for my aunt then. Throughout her life she's been the unwanted, the misplaced. Widowed within a week of her wedding she's had to go through life with the stigma of that misfortune pinned to her as if she were herself responsible for it. Small wonder that she's become unconventional, unlovely. We're in the same boat, my aunt and I; but our course has been set in opposite

directions. I have nothing in common with her and the only sympathy I can offer is that of the lips.

"She does good in her own way," Malini interposed mildly. "She's given her life to helping others and already the villagers know her. She has a way with people."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Sharada, "don't let's go all through that business of how she saved your life again."

"The doctors had given up all hope," said Malini a little stubbornly.

"Yes I know. I know. It was only her will which pulled you through. Good, I know all about it, I don't want to hear it again."

Malini seemed to subside, a little hurt; and I found consolation enough in this side-play to be able to say in a firm voice: "Aunt is old enough to do as she pleases."

"Old enough I suppose," Sharada took me up, "to meddle in other people's business. A woman came for her this morning to say that the baby was due."

"Why shouldn't she deliver children? She has enough experience and it's a natural phenomenon."

"It's also a natural phenomenon, as you call it, to have a baby in a hospital."

"Perhaps that woman doesn't like the hospital."

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's very awkward for us," Malini elaborated, "if aunt goes over the doctor's head like that. We are enjoying his hospitality."

"Exactly," said Sharada; "there's such a thing as professional etiquette."

"You needn't have any qualms about it," I said acidly, "the doctor's already made it clear that there will be a bill."

"Anyway," Sharada ignored the hint, "I don't know why you should be defending Aunt Ganga. You never

got on very well together. I remember the time she came to stay with us and you had an argument outside the bathroom door. You were disgustingly rude to her." She wouldn't forget of course; how many times, I wonder, has she reminded my aunt? Often enough, no doubt, to keep my aunt a stranger.

We relapsed into taut silence again. The interview wasn't going as I had planned. I had intended to have it out with them at the very beginning, to tell them exactly where they stood and exactly what I expected from them. But somehow there was something so frivolous about them that I couldn't take them seriously. Their very presence was unreal and their insistence on conventionality in a remote village like this was inconsistent with reality. Why should they care what the doctor thinks when in three weeks' time he will be no more than a name from the past? Why should they care what the hospital said about Aunt Ganga when they would never meet any of its inmates again?

It was the woman who rescued us from banality. She had been sitting outside the door, coughing occasionally to remind me she was there. Now she entered the room and began studiously to measure out my medicine. Malini took the hint.

"I think we ought to be going. The doctor gave us strict instructions not to stay after twelve and it's almost that now. But," she hesitated, "we haven't talked about you at all."

"What is there to talk about?"

She stood up irresolutely. "We haven't asked how you are, what we can do for you."

"I'm perfectly well, as you can see, and anything I want I get." I didn't mean to be curt with her but she forced me to be.

Sharada was so preoccupied with examining the woman that she didn't pay any attention to us. She asked suddenly if the woman was really my nurse and when I told her that she was a look of concern passed over her face. Concern or disgust, it was all the same. "But you can't have a woman like that about."

"Can't I?" I asked, my voice dangerous.

"It's twelve o'clock," Malini said hastily. "We'll come again this evening, but if there's anything we can do?"

I brushed her aside. "Why can't I?" I persisted.

Something in the tone of my voice held Sharada back. "There's nothing to stop you," she said at last, carelessly indifferent; "but it's typical of your perversity to insist on a woman like that. No doubt you get some pleasure from it."

I let them go without replying. Sharada's remark was just one more to chalk up against her. The woman, whom Sharada's comment had not escaped, was herself bursting with comment but I held up my hand for silence as I heard them take the path outside.

"... see her face properly," Malini was saying.

"The drawn blinds didn't fool me," Sharada laughed nastily. "It was quite disgusting to see how she had painted her face."

"It was really too dark to see," said Malini.

"Well, she hasn't changed at any rate." Sharada made no attempt to lower her voice. "She's always tried to brazen it out."

"We mustn't think about that now," Malini spoke in a voice so low that I could scarcely hear what she said.

"It isn't so easy to forget."

So intent was I on what Sharada was saying that I missed Malini's next remark.

"Do you think I can ever forgive her? Do you think I'll ever forgive her for sending father to his death?" Sharada's voice was like a whip across my heart. Even now, five and a half hours later, the wound throbs with dull torment.

It isn't true. It isn't true. I was unconscious in the hospital when that car crashed into the tree. When they told me I died myself. I wanted to die. I tried to die. If my pain could have brought him back he would be alive today.

What does she know of the life I have led? What does she know of the soulless killing of time that these past years have been? Can she judge the life I have led when she was not with me to share it? The empty nights, the abandoned days, the hours that dragged with loneliness and reproach? What does she know of these? Who is she to forgive? Can she condemn me when she herself was at fault for making my life what it has been?

I do not blame her for the friction between us. There is no law in nature which insists on sisters being boon companions. She was too old for me. She symbolised the world which I had grown out of, away from. She was my inheritance but never my evolution. But I do blame her for not trying to bridge the gulf that time had chiselled between us; it was her duty as the elder sister. I blame her for standing apart from me, rigid and unchanging, ever ready to lift the finger of derision at what I strove to be. I blame her for wrenching Malini away from me, Malini who was of my own generation, Malini who might have helped me make my compromise between the old and the new.

I was young and resilient, flexible enough to try to accept the changes which we were so suddenly thrust up against. I believed in the future as fanatically as a Catholic

believes in the confessional. I knew I was different. I knew I could accept and adapt those changes.

But Sharada had no understanding for me. The terror that she inspired in my youth I carried with me into maturity and her scepticism ruined my faith.

After mother's death she took upon herself the duties of the mother, but if that was maternal love then orphans are blessed. She damned me for everything that I did and, instead of inspiring me, condemned me for everything that I tried to be. She pounced upon my faults and my mistakes and held them up as an awful example of what I would become. "Mark my words," she said, so often that the words are engraved on my heart, "you'll turn out the worst of us all." I don't believe any of my youthful crimes were out of the common run but Sharada always managed to clothe them with a sinister intent and, as I grew into maturity, she used them as a weapon against me.

I've often tried to tell myself that her disapproval of me was only natural. Lacking the depth of understanding which alone makes change possible we had to play out the bitter little comedy of maladjustment. But if that is the truth why should Malini have escaped her? Why should Malini be free of her scorn?

No, if I am to be honest, I must accept our relationship for what it is, a symbol of the canker that has eaten into all our hearts. The answer to the tangled dissolution of our family lies in the little black box under my bed. If they hate me, if they condemn me, it is because the key of that box is in my keeping. That is the thing that has taken possession of us, the horror, the nightmare, the evil. Our family has got money on its brain.

They must be discussing me now for I've just sent word that I will not see them. I hate them. I despise

them. I would choke if they entered the room. They are no better than I, parasites with minds as empty as their souls. Who are they to judge and condemn? Who are they to drag up my past? I want Sharada's accusations as little as I want Malini's excuses. I don't care if I never see them again. What are they but pompous, hollow-chested harpies hungry for the blood of the dying.

# X

WE'VE had a meeting of the family council, a rump of a council perhaps, boasting no male voice; but sickeningly familiar in tone and tenor. We all lost our tempers, as we were bound to do; with the exception of Malini, our characters are too volatile to withstand friction. In this respect Malini is the only one who has anything of her mother in her; but then she has inherited mother's gentleness with none of mother's strength.

It all started with the doctor. (How many times, I wonder, will he decide the course of events in my life?) He sent word that he had to go to Malegaon, and Sharada, intercepting the message *en route*, stormed indignantly into my room before the appointed visiting hour.

"The sooner you leave here the better," she announced, drawing the chair so close to the bed that I was on the point of warning her against getting too near. "This place isn't good for any of us. I don't think you should travel by train but I am sure we can arrange for you to go down by car. It must be in easy stages but we can work out the details easily enough."

I couldn't help smiling. "Where's the fire?" I asked. She forgot her indignation for a moment to stare at me with appraising eyes. "Do you know," she said quietly, "if I didn't have it first hand from the doctor I would never believe you were really ill. Your face looks as fresh as anything and you're as pretty as ever." She spoke

without rancour and her manner was almost human; but I was glad she could not see my body.

"It's always like that," I murmured, drawing the sheet closer about my neck.

"But that's beside the point," she bristled. "I've got more important things to talk about."

"Apparently. What's all the fuss about?"

"Fuss? Is that all you can call it? When the doctor treats your own sisters as if they were less than dirt? Do you know what he did this morning? He sent the week's bill to us with a curt note that we should pay by return and when I answered that I'd like to talk to him about it he returned that he had no time for me. If the servant is to be believed he said that if I wanted to haggle I could go down to the village."

I suppose Sharada's news should have aroused me to indignation too. It is typical of the doctor's arrogance to answer as he did. He will never do more than despise the people to whom he has dedicated his life; the very fixedness of his purpose is itself an indication of his scorn. I've often wondered how he could live with this eternal contempt. This is one thing I shall never be able to understand about him. He hates at the same time as he serves. Isn't it perversity to do so? Or does his faith cancel the contradiction? The woman tells me that it is because of his faith that he hates but I cannot understand this. If he is what he preaches he should love and understand.

But this is all beside the point. I didn't share Sharada's indignation simply because I did not feel indignant. To be perfectly honest, I felt rather pleased. I was tickled by the doctor's action; it was a delicate and rather nice rebuff. The woman tells me that he insists on keeping aloof from my visitors to the point of rudeness. I like him for that.

Anyway, Sharada's indignation was purely selfish: if he hadn't presented her with the bill she would have been silent enough. I know how she's tried to talk with him, to make friends with him.

"Perhaps he needs the money," I said. "The hospital is almost bankrupt as it is."

She snorted with disgust. "You would stand up for him. When will you get over this fascination for the white skin? Haven't you the sense to know them for what they really are?"

"He hasn't done any harm," I answered mildly.

She laughed harshly. "Of course not. He's only insulted me but why should you care? You've always wanted to see me humiliated."

"Don't be silly," I returned, refusing to be angered. "There's been no insult. It's his manner to be curt and the servant may be exaggerating. You know what servants are. Let's be reasonable about this. Perhaps he really was in a hurry. Perhaps he had to see a man who was dying."

"I've heard that excuse before. And I suppose his rushing off to Malegaon every second day is also part of his work? I suppose the inhabitants there are dying off like flies so that he must leave the hospital to look after itself?"

Sharada has always had an unfailing and rather nasty instinct for ferreting out the worst side of a person's character. (What biological equation is there to explain the characteristics that we inherit? What biological justification is there for denying any one of us mother's gift? She always brought out the best in us; but then she died too soon.) This characteristic alone should put my suspicions to rest but somehow suspicion refuses to die. What she threw off as a careless accusation has taken root in my mind as a sinister possibility. What does indeed

call the doctor to Malegaon so often? What is more important to him than this hospital? No, I mustn't let my vision be clouded by Sharada's innuendoes. She would damn God himself if it would serve her purpose. As she has done so often with me, she must find some justification for her anger.

There was no pacifying her and I had to call in the others to help me. They seemed to come too quickly, almost as if they had been waiting outside the door; and I cannot resist the impression that they dreaded being left out of the picture. Watching their reactions on each other, I think I was right in thinking that they are not as united amongst themselves as they are against me. Aunt kept darting suspicious glances at Sharada, as if to assess what lay behind her words, and Malini, the faithful Malini, even forgot her role so far as to chide Sharada.

Yes, such is the evil that has taken possession of us all that we have forgotten the meaning of trust and confidence. This awareness might strengthen me but it also appals me. It carries the stench of decay.

"I think our duty is very clear," Sharada spoke in her self-assumed role of leader. "We must take Sarala away from this place."

"You seem to forget," I said, intercepting aunt's glance of distrust, "that I am not in a fit condition to be moved."

"That's what the doctor says," Sharada returned; "but how do you know that he's not trying to keep you here for another motive?" Her eyes, like everyone else's, found their way to the little black box.

"He wouldn't do that," Malini murmured uncertainly.

"He's capable of anything," Sharada said emphatically.

"Don't be silly. Why do you always expect the worst from people?" Malini spoke a little breathlessly, as if appalled by her attempt at rebellion.

"He's capable of anything." Sharada ignored her remark. "Haven't you noticed the expression in his eyes? I've never seen eyes so hard. I think we ought to call in another opinion."

"You're talking rubbish," my aunt snorted, "there isn't another doctor within miles."

"I suppose you don't think it worth the trouble to try," Sharada rounded on her. "You'd rather see her rot away in this place."

"She's been rotting away for eight months now. It's a pity you didn't think of it before."

"I'm not clairvoyant," Sharada snapped. "I didn't know she was here."

"Please," murmured Malini, "this isn't getting us anywhere."

"Malini's right," I said at last, putting an end to their bickering. "This doesn't get us anywhere." I felt enormously confident against them and willed them to listen to me. "I still don't see what all the fuss is about. If the doctor wants to send you a bill he's perfectly within his rights. This isn't a charitable institution."

"And he's perfectly right to be insolent, I suppose?" Sharada said.

"I don't take it as an insult."

"Of course you wouldn't. Why should you care?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I answered, losing patience, "let's be honest for once. You wouldn't have said a word if the bill had come to me. It's only because he's asked you to pay that you're getting so het up."

"That's not true. And besides, we are not here for our health."

"Aren't you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're here for what you can get, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know damn' well what I am talking about. Would you have considered it your duty to come if that little black box wasn't under my bed? If the doctor has an ulterior motive are you yourselves free from motives?"

"You're talking rubbish."

"Call it rubbish if you like but it's the truth. It hasn't taken you very long to find that box. I've noticed your eyes go to it time and again. Hell! I'll send you a photograph of it and then you can save yourselves the trouble of having to come here and talk to me."

"Please," said Malini, "you're not being very fair."

"Who is to judge that? The dying or the dispossessed?" I felt wonderfully in command of the situation and I made them listen to what I had to say. I told them what I wanted to tell them and, for once, I was not at a loss for words. "You've always taken upon yourselves the self-righteous duty of punishing me for what I was. Now it is my turn. You've treated me abominably in the past. You haven't come near me since father died. You hated me for what he had given me. Now it is my turn." I told them that if there was to be any future contact between us we must first start by clearing the air. They had thought money of enough importance to wreck a family. If they still believed that, and I had no evidence to the contrary, they must also believe money of enough importance to make them swallow their pride.

"You're getting quite eloquent," Sharada interrupted, "but where is all this leading to?"

"I'll tell you. You'll probably hate my guts but I'll tell you. You all think that I have no right to the money. You forget I have the right because father gave it to me."

"It's easy enough to rationalise about rights," Sharada said sullenly.

"You see," I said triumphantly, "that's all you care about. But don't forget that possession is nine points of the law."

"I don't know how long this is going to go on," Aunt Ganga said suddenly, "but I'm sick to death of these arguments. Whenever your family get together all they can ever talk about is money. Well, go ahead and talk. I've got more important things to do." She left the room abruptly and there was a feeling of anticlimax about her departure.

"Money seems to be all-important in some lives," Sharada hinted.

"It isn't as important to me as it may seem," I said hotly. "You can believe me or not, I don't care. But I've earned every penny of it and I intend to keep it."

"Earned it," she scoffed.

"Yes, earned it, with every minute of my life. And if you want anything of it you will have to earn it too. Earn it in the same way as I have, with your life's blood." She sniggered, and I, roused to bitter memories, almost cried as I repeated that I had earned it.

"All right," she said callously, "you needn't make a scene about it."

Her callousness restored my balance and I was able to speak quite calmly again. "Of course you've come here with some ideas of your own. But don't deceive yourself into thinking that I care for you in any way. If you want the honest truth I wrote to you because the doctor made me, not because I wanted to see you again. I don't give a tinker's curse for you. Why should I, after the way you've treated me?" Her eyes dropped to the little black box and I pressed home the advantage which I knew I had. "I haven't made a will as yet," I said softly, "but if you want any part of it, you will have to earn it."

I wonder if I handled the situation clumsily, if I should not have told them about the will. The look that crossed their eyes when I told them was a strange mixture of frustration and submission. I can derive no pleasure from recalling it.

They left me in a quiet and subdued mood and, this evening, their mood had not changed. But what value should I place on this submissiveness? How long will the mood last?

There's no sign of my brother and I doubt now whether he will answer me at all. It is this which weakens me, which drains out the purpose from my life. He is the only person who can give a direction to what remains of my life; the others are not important to me. They might raise feelings of frustration and anger in me but they are no more than millstones around my neck, time-filers in an empty life. What should I do with them when he is not here?

I suppose I ought to learn to be content with what I have but I have never been able to subdue the wishfulness in my character. I've always wanted so much, always striven after the impossible—and always lost the possible. Such is the stuff of which I am made.

Wishfulness is such a thing that it should be cut out of our lives at the moment of birth. It defines the extents of the weakness in our characters, the limits of our achievements. And yet we cling to it, cherish it, foster it and pretend that it is creation in its sublimest form. Is it sublime to deny the purpose so? I do not believe it. If I could cut this wishfulness out of my mind now I would be the most contented person on earth for I have Sharada beaten to her knees at last.

# XI

SUBMISSION comes strangely to them and already rebellion is sparking in their eyes. They obey me because they must but they are seeking a way to break my hold over them. Their eyes cling to the chain about my neck and they would wrench the key from me if they had the courage. They are afraid of me, they envy me, they would grovel before me; but their old spirit is not dead yet. I can recognise it still in the way their lips sneer and their eyes rake my body.

The doctor must have confirmed that my end is near for now they do not admire my face but wait with greedy eyes for me to disclose my body. They try to trace the outlines of that body under the sheets and if I put out my hand they fasten greedily on the twisted bones. They did not believe me when I told them that I had not made a will but they are afraid to trust their instincts. They want to verify their doubts before they rebel.

Sharada is their ring-leader. It is her distrust and suspicion which makes them what they are. Her intuition rejects belief but she dare not trust that intuition; the facts are all against her. Why should I have sent for them if they were not concerned in my will? Why should I delay making a will when I have lived with death for so long? I know the arguments they use very well. I can imagine them discussing me in the privacy of their room. I know how they must examine every word and every

action of mine. I asked the woman to see if she could discover what they say about me but they are too wary for her. Malini is always on guard at the window when they talk and the ward in which they live doesn't have the advantage of a verandah. It doesn't really matter. I know them too well not to be able to guess what they say.

With me they are still cautious; though Sharada sometimes forgets her purpose and taunts me for my weaknesses. This morning, for instance, she came to see me alone. When I asked where the others were she answered carelessly that they'd gone down to the village. Something in the tone of her voice told me that she'd sent them to the village in order to be able to talk to me alone and I was curious to hear what she had to say.

At first she talked about things that didn't matter. She retailed family gossip, told me what our various aunts and uncles were doing, described something of her own life. I've grown used to this sort of pointless conversation of late for they have all adopted it; it's the least dangerous ground. There's no harm done in talking about people who are no more than phantoms in my life.

Suddenly she switched the conversation over to Raj. She did it so adroitly that I was unprepared and, for a moment, unaware of what she was trying to say. She has a house near the sea-shore and her garden leads on to the sands. "It's an ideal playground for children," she said. "Raj's children come there quite regularly. They are not allowed to bathe of course, the currents are too strong. But it's nice to be able to sit on the sand on a warm evening."

"Yes," I answered, "that strip of beach is very pleasant. I like the way the coconut palms throw their shadow in the sea."

"It's quite typical." She looked at me strangely but I

didn't catch her mood. "He's got a lovely family. Very well brought up."

"He was always determined to have a model family. He used to say that a man was judged by his children."

"He's right. We can re-fashion our own lives in our children."

"They are our hostage to the future," I murmured, recalling what he had once said to me; "they are the purpose of life, they deny mortality."

"Nimi is quite a young woman now," she said in a quiet voice. "She's quite pretty, though she'll never be as beautiful as her mother."

"She used to have curly hair and a funny round little nose. Her nose always wrinkled when she laughed."

"It still does. She laughs often."

Suddenly I caught her eyes upon me again and the light in them wrenched me away from my memories. For three years Nimi was as my own child. When her mother died she came to live with us and I nurtured her as a mother. For three years I lived a life that should be every woman's; I learned what it was to give my strength to a creature weaker than I; I learned what the fullness of life could mean. But he took her away from me and, when father died, he cut her out of my life. The sudden loss was hard to bear: no more letters, no more scribbled postcards, no more expectations. I tried so hard to reach her again but he put a barrier between us. My letters remained unanswered, my enquiries were ignored.

"What the devil are you talking about?" I asked harshly. "Do you think I care what happens to his family now?"

"It's rather strange that you haven't sent for them. I should have thought Raj would have been the first person you'd have sent for."

"You can keep your suspicions to yourself, I don't want to hear them."

"Isn't it obvious?" she said, cruelly insistent; "you always used to be as thick as thieves but now you don't want to hear anything from him. I find that significant."

She is a malicious creature to remind me of all this; she has neither compassion nor pity. Of course they must be wondering why Raj is not here but can't they accept matters as they stand? Must they always bring friction with them? Yes, I wonder too why Raj has not answered me. I try not to think of him but he is not to be ignored. His absence drains out the purpose from my life. He is the only one who can give a direction to what remains of it but he will not come.

No wonder I am dispirited and discontented. With one part of my mind I know that this is the moment I have been waiting for all my life; this is the moment that I have planned and awaited as I lay sleepless in my bed. Sharada for her cruelty, Malini for her cowardice, they must both pay for what they have done to me. They could have made my youth a happy one, they could have supported me in my conflicts, consoled me in my frustrations. They denied me in everything; because my father loved me they denied me in everything. Well, this is my revenge. My body might be shrivelled, my limbs without strength, but this is my revenge.

Aunt understands something of my feelings; and, in her own inexplicable way, she tries to console me. She tries to help me. I tried to apologise to her yesterday for the way I had treated her when she first arrived but she brushed my apology aside.

"It's all right. I know what your temper is like. But you must try and control it."

"Why should I? It seems too pointless to stick to convention now."

"It's nothing to do with conventions. You're only making yourself ill."

I laughed bitterly. "You think I'm going mad too."

"Good gracious, no." She spoke roughly, as she sometimes does; but the very absence of gentleness consoled me. "There's no madness in our family. But you're getting too morbid and introspective. You must pull yourself together."

"Why should I bother? The end is near."

"Don't descend to self pity. It doesn't suit you. Have you really finished with life? Is there nothing left to do?" Her eyes were sharp and insistent.

"No. I still have a debt to pay." She nodded, encouraging me to continue. "But I don't know what to do. They hate me so."

"You hate them too. What have you got against them?"

"They hate me for what father gave me. They want to see me down."

"But you have the upper hand now. You've always had the upper hand. Your father gave you everything you wanted."

"That's not fair. He was good to the others too."

"But you were his favourite."

"Only because I gave him everything. Only because I stood by him."

"Did you? Have you forgotten how you used to quarrel with him?"

"I don't want to think about that. That's incidental. I couldn't help it. You mustn't remind me."

"All right, I won't. But you can't forget it. When you think of the debts that you have to pay you must remember it."

She was trying to help me. Even though she opened a fresh wound she was trying to help me. I could see that

in her eyes. Yes, there are many things that I must remember now. I must recall them all with a fearless heart and then make up my balance sheet. I cannot talk about debts and vengeance until every factor is clearly assessed.

I know that I am going to die. Like the sun which empties this plain of shadows my vision is clear too. But I am not afraid; familiarity has bred in me a contempt of death. I've had time enough to accustom myself. My days and my hours are numbered. Physically my body grows stronger every day but my mind does not keep pace. I haven't the wherewithal to put all my muddled thoughts into order. I must choose carefully. I must dispense with irrelevancies; conjecture serves as little a purpose as does desire. I must accept and act with that acceptance.

Let me first admit that I have not made a will, that I do not know what to do with the money. It has played so important a part in my life and yet now my mind is torn with indecision. If I die without making a will the property will return to them. If I make a will I must deny them. Which is it to be? Should I bequeath the curse to them, for cursed I know it is; or should I let the curse die with me? I must make up my mind.

They do not understand my dilemma. Sharada and Malini believe me possessed and only humour me because they must. Aunt wants to help me but does not know how. The doctor has no patience with me. Only the woman understands something of what I feel; in her own animal way she knows the torment that's raging through my mind.

It's a torment which has little to do with the living. It's a torment that concerns men who have died and days that have passed. I want to put the clock back, I want to recapture the past. I want to make my peace before it is too late.

## XII

IT'S happened at last, the thing that I most wanted, that I most dreaded. My brother is here. He arrived without warning this afternoon. He sat on that chair, leaned his elbows on this table and the echo of his voice is in the room still. His arrival has sent my world spinning into oblivion, leaving me marooned, a swimmer caught by a relentless tide. I cannot reach shore now; I've lost my bearings and the waters are too swift and deep.

If only I'd known this was to happen. If only I'd been given some warning. The sun should have risen red and angry or an ominous wind whistled through the air. I would have understood. Instead, everything was dully normal. The woman brought in my cup of tea, hot and sweet the way I like it. The doctor paid his brief visit. I sent word through the woman that I would see the others in the afternoon.

I picked up the papers and tried to read but felt too drowsy to turn the pages and stared at the headline—"Counter-Offensive Launched"—until the black type melted into the blankness of sleep. When I opened my eyes again the sun was already past its zenith and the woman had pulled the screen before the door and drawn down the blinds in the verandah. The heat, however, was already in possession; it hung sultry and torpid about me, pressing my head back into the pillows.

The sound of the horn broke into my reverie, a sharp

metallic chord that crashed through the drowsing silence. I heard the woman cry out as she was dragged from sleep. She rushed into my room and stood peering at me, the sleep still heavy in her eyes. She had to lean down and touch me before she was completely reassured that it was not I who had called out. I pointed to the verandah: "It sounded like a car": and she pushed the screen aside and went out. She drew up a blind and I caught the shadow of her figure outlined clearly against the dazzling rectangle of light before shutting my eyes against the glare. "Can't see anything from here," she muttered, so passionately intent on probing the mysterious sound that she forgot to draw down the blind again.

The rectangle of light reached the foot of my bed, accentuating the whiteness of the sheets so sharply that it pained my eyes to look. I lifted my hand to shade my eyes and was surprised to find it trembling. No one, not even a stranger who has lost his way, comes to this side of the hospital and no sound like that has ever broken the silence that wraps this place about. Voices yes, the sound of feet, the watchman's shuffling and his emphatic belching—but never a sound like that. I grew impatient for the woman's return and, such is hindsight, never dreamed that there was my portent.

And then there was the sound of voices in the inner room—the doctor's and another which I dared not recognise. A thick, smooth voice which cut short the doctor's remark: "Of course, I understand doctor. I'll be guided by what you say." How well I knew that voice and the manner which went with it! The gentle inclination of the head and the self-effacing smile that seemed to draw the listener into the speaker's confidence.

I didn't have time to turn my head. They came round the foot of the bed and, as they passed through the

rectangle of light, I saw the immaculate crease down my brother's trousers.

"Sarala, my dear," he said, "I didn't expect to find you like this. You can't imagine how shocked I was to get your letter. Tell me, how are you? Is there anything I can do for you?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. At that moment the one desire in my mind was to see his face. I motioned to the doctor and he went into the verandah to pull up the other blinds. The whine of the pulleys and then the room flooded with the white, scintillating light of the afternoon.

"Ah! That's better," Raj began and then broke off, surprise lifting the mask of geniality from his face. "But you told me—" He stopped.

The question was so plain that I wonder the doctor did not hear it. What did he expect to find? Did he expect me to look like a corpse, I who have yet to die? Doesn't he know that an illness such as mine leaves the face untouched? Was his disappointment so great as to make him lose his composure?

His confusion gave me a momentary advantage and I was able to return his question with a smile, a smile which didn't hide my satisfaction that the years had treated him roughly. Always on the heavy side, he was now distinctly gross, the rolls of fat overflowing his collar, and his suit, however well cut and tailored, clinging too tightly to his body.

My satisfaction was short-lived. I've always marvelled at my brother's resilience but never more so than at that moment. He quickly adjusted his expression to the bedside manner. "Sarala, my dear. Why didn't you tell me about this? Why didn't you write before? I can't tell you how unhappy this has made us. I came as quickly as I could."

It was then that I noticed the packet in his hand. Ever the master of gesture he had brought a little present with him. He caught the direction of my eyes and held it out to me. I did not want to take it, did not want to touch it.

"Just a little something." He put it down on the sheet beside me, a little brown paper parcel containing a book. "We haven't forgotten your liking for poetry. I asked Nimi to choose it."

I put out my hand then and touched the brown paper wrapping. My fingers smoothed the paper and memory stirred deep down within me, the memory of something cherished and lovely, something that I had lost. He didn't miss my response. I think he had brought that book purposely to see what my response would be. If he had once taken her away from me for a purpose could he not bring her back into my life again for a purpose? His eyes grew small with some hidden thought and I pulled my hand away from the parcel and clenched it under the sheet. He turned his head away from me and started to examine the room and I inspected it with him, object for object. I saw its weary dilapidation through his eyes—the cracking plaster, the gaping windows, the stained wash-stand.

I can't explain what happened to me then. Perhaps it was reaction from the sudden surprise, perhaps it was seeing him frown with disgust at the sight which met his eyes. Whatever it was, anger hit me then, anger so sharp and biting that it made my voice tremble and my eyes glisten. But I turned my anger not against him but against the doctor and for that I have even less explanation.

"Who the devil told you to bring him here?"

No, I don't want to recall the words that I used. They were foul and bitter. I accused the doctor of making a schedule to suit his own convenience. I hinted that he

had a private reason. I threatened to report him. Of course he fell back; of course he was struck speechless. So much venom in a single speech was indeed phenomenal. And I played right into my brother's hands.

"My dear girl. You mustn't take it like this." There was silk in his voice but such unconcealed triumph in his eyes that I wanted to hit out and strike them shut. "I am sure the doctor was only trying to help. Doctor, I didn't know anything about these visiting hours. I wouldn't have dreamed of intruding in this way."

"It's no intrusion." The doctor looked at me as if I was some kind of poisonous snake. "It's only that your aunt arrived the other day and made such a mess of things that I had no choice but to insist on visiting hours. A hospital must have some regulations."

"So. You made that schedule just to keep her out?" I shot back. "What have you got against her? What's my brother going to do for you that you're falling over yourself trying to do things for him?"

"Really, Sarala, this is going too far. Doctor, I think you'd better let me handle this. She's over-excited. Perhaps if you were to wait for me outside?" He put his arm around the doctor's shoulders and shepherded him towards the door. The gesture seemed to bind them together. "It must have been a great shock my appearing out of the blue like this. I shall never forgive myself for not writing to you. It was most thoughtless of me but there was so much to do. Is there anything I can do to show you how sorry I am that my sister should talk to you like that? I'm deeply sorry." Smoothly he saw the doctor out and then, still talking, came back to my bed and lowered himself ponderously into the chair. The very slowness of his movements gave them a kind of ominous threat.

I listened for the sound of the doctor's footsteps to die on the soft earth outside. "You can stop talking," I said at last, "he can't hear you now."

Those were the only words that I addressed directly to him this afternoon but for all their efficacy they might well have remained unspoken. He had the advantage and he pressed it home shrewdly. He lectured me for my behaviour, taunted me for my lack of self-control. I had disgraced and humiliated him. Had I no sense of proportion? Was I never to learn discretion? Why should he tolerate my moods when I myself had neither shame nor responsibility? Had the years taught me nothing?

So it went, on and on, the same phrases, the same scolding, the same deadlock. How familiar is the pattern! How often has he driven me into just such a position and then how often accused me! Have the years really taught me nothing? Am I still no more than putty in his hands, to be moulded to his whim?

The doctor came at last to take him away and I wept with relief to be alone again. So easily have I fallen back into my old habits. The intervening years have dissolved into nothing, as ephemeral as this pink lustre of the sunset. I am again the child of fifteen years ago whom he drove to kill the one living thing that anchored its heart to reason. I am again the child whom he wrenched from its moorings, lashed with contempt, drove into conflict. If that child was confused so is this woman. Child or woman the tyranny is the same. That child destroyed. There is nothing left for this woman to destroy but herself.

Does he know that? Is that why he has come?

Would to God I knew what he is doing now. He must be in the doctor's house, sitting in the verandah perhaps, smoking a cigarette and conferring with the others. None

of them have come to see me yet. What is he saying to them? What is he planning? God! I wish I knew.

So easy is it to call upon the name of God, so quickly does it come to the lips; but how laggard, how reluctant is the response!

The sun has dropped into the horizon and the thick blanket of darkness has begun to envelop the earth. The moon has yet to rise. Somewhere, just around the corner, a light to match mine shines out into the darkness. They are sitting around it, leaning towards a man whose girth hides the outlines of his chair. They lean towards him, listening, nodding. The watchman shuffles past and they turn for a moment, their eyes blank with hidden purpose.

Oh watchman, watchman, stop your belching and your shuffling. Creep around to the doctor's house. Crouch against the wall and tell me what he is saying.

## XIII

R AJ is a fast worker. He has got to work on the doctor already. He has started to inject the poison and I have no antidote.

"I don't particularly want to discuss your behaviour yesterday," the doctor said to me. "I am quite willing to put it down to the state of your health." I didn't dare open my mouth to answer for I feared it would be to apologise. I wasn't going to be bullied into submission. "I'm sorry you have nothing to say," he continued, "perhaps I am expecting too much. Your brother has told me something about your life and, in the circumstances, I am sorry. More sorry than I can say."

"There's nothing in the story of my life to explain my behaviour yesterday," I said abruptly. "It might console you to think that I am unbalanced but you had no right to bring him here without asking my permission."

"Nothing can explain away your behaviour yesterday," he said pompously. "I shudder even now to recall it."

"Why recall it then?" I asked.

He looked at me in self-righteous pity. "What is the matter with you? Why are you like this? In the little time that you have left can't you think of nobler things? Can't you turn your thoughts more towards God?"

"What's he got to do with it?" I asked bitterly.

"You must learn to forgive, to forget. What has your brother done to you for you to hate him so?"

I know what Raj has said to him. What a weapon he has to explain my dementia ! Is there a man alive who would make allowances for me after Raj has given him his own interpretation of the sort of life I have led ?

"You must not talk like that," he answered, shocked. "God is our salvation. One day you will realise that. Pray God, you will realise it soon."

"Aren't you making a mistake ? What should I, a heathen, know about God ? You've condemned me to purgatory already."

"It isn't too late to relent. Christ has borne the burden of all our sins."

"But I was born a sinner. Why should you blame me for that ?"

"Your sin must be redeemed."

"God is one and indivisible. I must find my redemption on earth."

"The way to Him lies through Christ. I shall pray to Him to intercede for you. His Grace is all-embracing. He welcomes sinners."

"Thank you, no. I don't want that kind of condescension. I don't like your Christ and I was not born a sinner. It's a poor sort of God you have to steep us in sin before we are born."

We've argued about religion many times before but never so bitterly as we did this morning. I know he cherishes a hope that he will one day be able to change my mind; conversion must be the nectar of life to a Christian. But I wonder why he does not leave me alone. In the Christian hereafter there must be a place reserved for the unworthy. Why doesn't he relegate me to that and be done with it ?

He's so obsessed with my soul that he doesn't care about my body. He hasn't noticed any improvement in

me whatsoever. I asked him if I could spend the evenings out in the garden, telling him that it was unbearably hot in the room. "We haven't the staff to provide such luxuries," he replied. I suppose he thought that I was just trying to be troublesome.

My aunt paid me a brief visit this morning, five and three-quarters of a minute by the clock. She too had changed. "I can't stay," she said. "There's a woman I've promised to see in the village. I heard what happened yesterday. It wasn't very clever of you." I tried to ask her what she meant but she wasn't in the mood to talk. She smiled at some secret joke and I tremble with dread to know what she might mean.

Malini came to see me alone and, though I could not find any change in her, I know that she too is in the process of change. "I'm sorry Sharada couldn't come. She's down with a touch of fever. It's nothing serious, just the same malaria; but the doctor thinks it would be wiser for her to stay in bed today." Of late I've had so much proof of the unchanging pattern of life and this was another, trifling perhaps but characteristic. Sharada would always be susceptible to these touches of fever and Malini would always make excuses for her.

There's a pattern ordained for each individual, a range of experience beyond which he cannot stray. Like the radio sets which have their stations pre-selected to the touch of a button, our reception is pre-selected too, and though we might have the whole universe to choose from, only a mechanic can alter the wavelength. Our buttons and our switches are set for us from birth and once we have tried out their capacity and range we must be content with a theme without variations. Malini would always stand by Sharada, and I, remembering what it was before we had reached our boundaries, would always try

to wean her away. As I did this morning though I knew the attempt would be futile.

She looked very aged and tired and, watching her as she shifted restlessly in her chair, I was puzzled by her weary eyes. She sensed my puzzlement and smiled ruefully. "You haven't changed at any rate. You're still the prettiest of us three."

It was the second time I had been called pretty but I brushed the compliment aside. At that moment I wanted to understand something about her own life. I had heard about the loss of her child and asked her about it. At that moment I think she too wanted to explain, to share. That was perhaps one of those rare moments when, if we had the tools, we could have altered our reception. It didn't require much, just one turn of the screw.

"He always wanted a boy and I could only give him that one girl. We called her Sarala."

"But not after me. That was grandmother's name." My voice was brittle again, the moment had fled. "You should have tried Sharada, you might have had more luck."

She shook her memories away. "I didn't come to talk about myself. Is there anything I can do for you?" We were back to normal.

"Thank you. I'm quite comfortable."

"I'm afraid we haven't been able to do anything at all since we arrived."

"We didn't have much time." I accentuated the plural.

She seemed to wince a little. "I wish you and Sharada could get on together. I know she's a little difficult sometimes but she doesn't mean it."

"She gives a pretty good imitation of it then."

"She can't help it. If you could only understand that."

"Why should I take the trouble?" I asked.

She hesitated and then, coward that she is, changed the subject. "Did Aunt Ganga come to see you this morning? She said that she would."

"Yes. She warned me against Raj. What has he been saying to you?"

"Raj? What should he say?" She opened her eyes a little too widely for me to believe her.

"But you've been discussing me," I insisted.

"Of course. We all want to see you well again."

I dismissed her as soon as I could. I can't find the patience to put up with her evasions. I know perfectly well that he has put his plans before them and she can't fool me by prevaricating. She paused at the door and there was something about the way she drew her sari about her shoulders that reminded me of mother. "Sarala. Don't think too badly of us. If we were born with the wisdom we have now the world would be too good a place to live in."

I realised then how easily I had let the moment of reconciliation pass; but reconciliation is the work of two. She's too much of a coward to meet me half-way.

There's one person, however, whom he'll never win over to his side. The woman hates him and in that she is one with me. I'd never thought to wonder at her reactions; to my mind she didn't enter into the picture at all. But she was so morose as she attended me this morning that I, thinking it was something to do with her son, asked her about him. I must make this clear. I did not intend to probe into her feelings for my brother. I haven't reached such straits that I must turn to a servant for sympathy. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Has the boy been up to his tricks again?"

"The boy?" she snorted; "there's nothing the matter with the boy. What should be the matter with him?" She was aggressive, defensive.

"Nothing. You look upset, that's all."

"Upset? Who wouldn't be upset?" She narrowed her eyes in anger. When she's in one of her moods she can be as unmanageable as an unbroken horse, and I, well tuned to these moods, made haste to draw her out. "Come now," I coaxed, "tell me what it's all about. It can probably be put right quite easily."

"It's that chauffeur and bearer of his," she began. "Who do they think they are? The lords of creation? They haven't been here a day and they've turned the place upside down. They want this, they want that. This isn't good enough for them, that is just terrible." She gave her phrases a musical lilt. "They've never seen things done this way. They won't have it done another way. What do they want? Why did they come?"

I had to interrupt to make sense of her words. If Raj has brought his servants with him, and I've never known him travel without, I didn't see what they had to do with her. "What's the matter with them? Do they get in your way?"

"In my way? They're under my feet. They lord it about as if they own the place. They've commandeered the whole of the doctor's house and set everything topsy turvy. They've locked the side entrance and bolted the gate. They've parked that lump of steel under the *banyan* tree and forbidden anyone to go near it."

"Oh, no," I protested. There was metallic heat in the sun the day I arrived here and they put me under that tree while this room was made ready for me. In the shade of those twisted roots I found a peace which I have never been able to recapture. It was so cool there and the sharp tang of those leaves was sweet. I remember that tree well. I have wanted to rest there again.

Not knowing the reason for my protest she looked

shrewdly at me but I gave her another reason. That tree was also the favourite siesta spot of the hospital servants.

"Indeed it is," she agreed. "Must we vacate the whole hospital for them? What do they think we are? Lepers?" I let her talk. I didn't put much store by what she said for that class of person is adept at making compromises. Tomorrow, no doubt, she'd use another tone. "Do you think they will talk to us? Not on your life. It's as much as they can do to say good morning, and as for talking, they won't let me get near them." I couldn't help smiling. "Oh, you can smile but you don't know how they insult me. I asked them where they came from and that chauffeur pretended he hadn't heard. I asked how long they intended to stay and they looked at me as if I had two noses. What do they think I am?" She had many more senseless and trivial complaints to make; and then she said something which made me stiffen with interest. "They are acting on his orders. No servant would dare behave like that without his master's orders. He's up to no good." She threw off this remark as she had the others, carelessly, as part of the general tirade. But my mind fastened greedily upon it, the only significant sentence in a senseless outburst.

She's right. Of course she's right. He or his, there's no deed without a motive. In her own way the woman has discovered that truth. Every nerve in my body tingles to that truth but I cannot find the motive. Of what concern is the woman to him? Why should he set his servants upon her? Why should he try to set the doctor against me? What is it all about?

Till now everything had seemed too simple. I had reached an understanding with the others and the future was as clear as the water from a mountain spring. I knew what I had to do and I knew what to expect from the

others. It was all so definite, so natural. Now I am lost in a vortex of doubt, choked by apprehension of his purpose.

I didn't want to think of him today but he is not to be ignored. His presence has the same inevitability as this late summer sun, unrelenting of purpose, tenacious of intention. I should be accustomed to him by now for he has always been so; always beaten down my resistance as the sun beats down the grass and makes the leaves on the trees wilt and crumple under its rays. But what is it in me that he wants to subdue? What is it that he must fight?

I am deadly afraid. I was caught in his net once and only extricated myself by destroying the bonds which bound me to life. I was free for ten years, free in the way a lunatic is free of care; but now I am caught again. I don't know what to do and I am afraid to move. His power over me is still too great.

## XIV

I HAD a letter in the post this morning which has filled me with fresh dread. I dare not ask the woman to draw up the blinds for fear of prying eyes outside. I dare not sleep for fear of what would happen over my senseless body. I know it is hysterical to be so afraid, but dear God ! help me now for fear has paralysed my reason.

The letter was from my solicitors at home and was quite a routine letter in so far as it told me about my affairs—the sort of letter which I receive regularly from them. But the postscript contained one foreboding sentence: "Your respected brother called on us last week and wondered whether it would not lower the value of the big house if we were to build there. He told us he intended to discuss the matter with you and, in view of his remarks, we are holding up the negotiations until we hear further from you."

This can only mean one thing; it confirms all my suspicions and raises all the old terror in me again. I know what delayed him now. It wasn't work that kept him away from me, it wasn't a desire to tease me with uncertainty and impatience; it was simply that he had to know first what was at stake. He considers the house so important as to make that diversion of six hundred miles before coming here to me. He had, first, to make certain of what I had to give. Would he have come at all if he had discovered that I had nothing to give ?

What else has he discovered about my affairs ? Of course he can't make the solicitors disclose my secrets but he is adept at worming out the truth from carelessly dropped remarks. He must know already that I haven't yet made a will but have they told him of the will that I intended to make ? I've already hinted about it to my solicitors more than once; the last time in the letter the woman posted for me about a week ago. That would be just about the time when he was there. Was he in the office when that letter arrived ? What has he told them to make them disobey my orders ? Of course they will have to carry out my orders in the end but he has already sown just that shadow of doubt in their minds to make their obedience reluctant; and, chained to this bed as I am, I am helpless to counteract his words.

I should have known that I was not the only person with plans for father's house. I should have known that Raj wants possession of it. There's just that streak of sentimentality in him that makes him cherish his old roots. It's the same with me. I've never been able to bring myself to sell father's house even though I've never been able to live there myself and even though it's always proved a liability to me. Of late another possibility had occurred to me. The house stands in two acres of grounds and, with conditions as they are today, it's valuable building land. I'd thought of building two smaller houses on this land and so recuperate some of the money I've had to spend on the larger house. The plans for these new buildings arrived about a month ago, before my last attack; but I haven't yet confirmed them. I don't think I had quite made up my mind. Now it seems that I am to be forced into a decision.

If ever I needed proof of his motives I have it now. However much he might protest, however much he might

ridicule my suspicions, he wants possession and he will fight to the death for it. The years have not changed him; his purpose is as inflexible as ever.

His life has been guided by one sole purpose—money; his vision has been blinkered by the need for it. The only surviving son of his father he had the right to expect it, but father denied him. He never accepted father's verdict. He spent his life staking a claim where none existed, bringing a fiendish calculation into his efforts, never slackening, never admitting defeat. I had thought that, after father's death, he would relax and accept father's verdict. The will was unbreakable and there was nothing he could do to wrench possession from me. He had to stand aloof, excluded. But now I know that he was only biding his time, only waiting his opportunity. There's something in his mind to give him hope.

His motives no longer repel me, or make me afraid; but his methods do. They describe the callousness of his mind and the coldness of his heart. Would anyone else postpone a visit to the dying in order first to assess the reward that death will bring?

I don't know why I should treat this as a new discovery. I know him almost better than he knows himself. When he returned from abroad, fully conscious of his rights as the eldest son, it was I who bore the weight of that consciousness. It was I in whom he confided, I whom he tried to win over to his side. I used to flatter myself that he came to me because he needed me. He always came to my room after one of those interminable arguments with father—arguments so bitter and unforgettable that, even now, I dread the sound of voices raised in anger—and ask for consolation from me. I consoled him because I believed in him, believed what he himself believed: that he had a right which was inalienable.

It wasn't till much later that I realised what he wanted from me. I repeat, I was foolish enough to think that he needed me. I used to flatter myself that I was different from the others, finer, more sensitive; I used to flatter myself that he liked and admired me.

Sometimes I was given a sign of the things that were to come. Like a flag which flutters in a sea breeze, I could have seen, when the wind blew in my direction, the true colours that he carried. But I was too blind to look. If I found him going through my letters, if father dropped a hint about the things that he had said, I didn't care to read the signs.

There was one morning, for instance, which stands out very clearly in my memory. It was one of those cool monsoon days when the sun is hidden behind clouds and the rain-washed air whispers through the trees. The windows to the drawing room were wide open and there was just enough breeze to stir the curtains and ripple the loose covers on the sofa. He was sitting by the radiogram listening to a record but he got up as I entered the room and asked where father was. I told him that father was with a client and lunch would be delayed.

"Good," he said and switched off the music. He put his arm around my shoulders and led me to the sofa. "Come and sit down," he continued, "I want to talk to you."

His eyes were small with frustration but I couldn't understand why. There'd been no arguments that day, nothing that could have disturbed the peace between father and son.

"Don't pull away from me," he continued, with a smile that sent a thrill through me. "I'm not trying to do you any harm."

"What's the matter?" I asked uncertainly. "What's happened?"

He laughed. "What should happen? Do I only want to talk to you when something happens? Is there nothing else that we can talk about?" I shook my head mutely. "Well then, relax, let yourself go. There's been no argument today and you don't have to be so tense." Slowly, still uncertain, I let myself rest against his shoulder.

"Isn't that better?" he asked at last.

Suddenly I took his hands between mine and told him that I loved him.

"I know you do," he answered, "I know you do. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance to you."

"You're not being a nuisance."

"Aren't I? Don't I know how you hate these eternal quarrels? Can't I see how tense you get, how you close up within yourself?"

"I wish you and father would get on together," I answered. "You're his only son, he must love you very dearly. He doesn't want to cut you out of his life. But you behave so strangely with him. Father says you act as if you didn't belong."

"So!" He took me up swiftly, jerking away from me. "You do discuss me, you do talk about me? Aren't you too young to meddle in other people's business?"

"Oh, no!" I was afraid of his accusations. "I'm not trying to meddle. I'm only trying to help."

"Is that what you call helping? Setting father up against me? What do you think you're going to get out of it? Do you think father will give you the money? Is that what you're waiting for?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," I protested; "don't you discuss father with me?"

"That's got nothing to do with it," he said harshly.  
"You've no business to interfere between father and me."

What use to try and recall the words we spoke to each other? He twisted everything I said to suit his own arguments and the only vivid thing about that morning is the sense of foreboding he left me with. It's the same sort of foreboding that I have now, a foretaste of things to come; a horrible sense of guilt which drove me forward into guilt. It's the same with me now. I don't know what he can make me do today but the sense of guilt is already in possession.

I had fresh proof of his methods within ten minutes of holding the solicitors' letter in my hand. The postman knows me well enough now to bring any letters for me straight to the woman and only those who are constantly on guard can tell when such letters arrive. And yet, within ten minutes of receiving the letter, Raj was at my door. I heard him coming and was able to push the letter under the sheets but his eyes were dark with suspicion and he knew that something had happened.

"I'm going down to the village this morning," he said, pulling up a chair, "can I do anything for you?"

I was on the point of answering that all my needs were served by the woman when I suddenly realised how much that would be playing into his hands. He's suspicious of the woman but as yet his suspicions are merely instinctive, they need confirmation. If he were to know just what the woman does for me I dread to think what he would do. He's capable of anything.

I suppose I should have confronted him with the letter but I was afraid to do so. He must never know all that I know about him.

"I had a letter from Nimi today," he said, "shall I read it to you?"

I shook my head stubbornly. "There's nothing that she has to say that concerns me."

"Oh, but there is. She asks after you and wants to know if you are getting better." He drew a letter out of his pocket.

"That's kind of her." I didn't trust myself to say too much; my feeling for Nimi is something I haven't yet been able to assess. Sometimes, as when he brought me the book which she had chosen, my heart twists with love. Sometimes, as today when he showed me her letter, I hate the very sound of her name.

"They are spending the summer holiday in Kataul," he said. "The boys have another month or so before they go back to school."

"How interesting!" I remarked scathingly.

He sighed. "You're in one of your difficult moods. I'd better go down to the village."

I let him go without another word. I knew the purpose for which he came and I was determined to foil him. I didn't trust myself to speak because I was afraid of what my words would tell him. But now that he has left me I want him desperately back in the room again. I dare not trust him out of my sight. I cannot bear to be in the same room with him. It's torment to be so afraid.

I must try and pull myself together. There's nothing he can do to hurt me now. I should not be afraid of him. He belongs to a past which I have left behind me.

There's no comfort in these words. No certainty. I am afraid; so afraid that I can scarcely sit still in this bed. I want to get up and run away. I want to escape him. I must escape him.

## XV

I AM reconciled now. I am no longer afraid. I know what to do. For the past week fear has held me captive, an intangible physical dread which my mind could not answer but which left my body weak. It seemed to press into me, seemed to drain out the will in me. I lay inert, incapable of movement, conscious only of that empty, gnawing dread which seemed to have usurped all the functions of my body.

Six torpid days have passed me by, six precious days. Each had its incident: the girls with their aura of perfume, my aunt seeming to grow more careless every day, the doctor more distant, more callous, my brother moving relentlessly in the oppressive heat. They came and went as they pleased, accepting my passivity without question.

I knew how completely Raj had taken charge by the way my routine had altered. The doctor's visiting hours were scrapped on the second day and they were at liberty to harass me whenever they pleased. They didn't hesitate to wake me from slumber or to interrupt a meal. They didn't care if I was too tired to talk or too lonely to be alone. They ignored my wishes and imposed themselves upon me as aunt had once tried to do.

In the upsetting of this routine the doctor played as passive a part as I myself did. Sometimes I would catch a look of rebellion in his eyes but, for the most part, he seemed to accept Raj's orders as inevitable. Occasionally

I felt that this acceptance had nothing to do with me or my family; his mood of indifference seemed somehow to stem elsewhere than from us, but then I would watch his eyes when Raj was in the room and knew that it was because of me. I was to realise how inevitable his acceptance was when the woman told me that he had put his house at their disposal. The girls no longer lived in an empty ward but had settled themselves into his rooms; they used his kitchen and had engaged a complete staff of servants from the village. Ironically enough the sweeper is the one that the doctor dismissed; but there again the doctor seems to have lost the heart to protest. He has been left with two rooms to call his own. "His house is much too large for a single person," the woman told me, "you could fit in ten more and still have enough room." Perhaps it serves the doctor right but I don't like to think of them in possession. It's a sign of their determination to see this thing through to the bitter end.

I've had many signs and indications of their determination in this past week. The mood of subordination which had touched them so fleetingly before Raj's arrival is now as elusive as the scent of wood-smoke in the twilight hour. They treat me as they would a madman, humouring my mood only when it verges on hysteria. They refuse to listen to what I have to say and only take me seriously when they want to chide or upbraid me. And all the while they watch me out of cautious eyes, as if afraid to let me out of their sight. This feeling of being constantly under observation has been I think the most hideous part of the past week. They would not let me alone for too long and the only time that they allowed me for myself was the twilight hour when I so hate to be alone. I could not protest. I had to submit like the vanquished, the defeated.

But the spell was broken on the seventh day and I am no longer afraid.

Last night I fell asleep fretfully wondering what I should do about the doctor. If my plans are to stand as they are made he must forgive me; but Raj has so fostered his sense of injury that I am beginning to think that atonement is impossible. I still care for his good opinion, still want to make him understand. If only because of what lies in my little black box he must distinguish malice from malady, he must judge me as a patient and not as a felon. Would my gift have any purpose otherwise?

Towards morning, my brain, working under a pressure that only restless sleep can give, had shifted to my father. One of those sharp bitter arguments had flared up between us and, though I can't recollect what it was about, the mood was horribly familiar. I jerked myself from sleep before those irrevocable words were spoken but, looking out upon the still, moonlit night, couldn't be sure whether I had indeed shouted those words aloud or carried their foreboding with me from my dreams.

I tried to compose myself and sleep again but my brain would not relax. Whenever I closed my eyes it was to see the verandah at home and the broken figure of a man pathetically upright in a chair two feet from me. I must have slept, however, for the woman had to shake me to wake me. She smoothed my hair back from my face. "Wake up now, your tea will get cold. You cried out again in your sleep last night."

She judges my progress by the tranquillity of my sleep, so she would not have believed that, after she had left the room, I was able to get out of bed. Just that. Today I was able to get out of bed. Today I was able to take three steps away from my bed. I don't know what

prompted me to try. As I saw her pass the verandah I threw off the sheet and got out of bed.

The spell was being broken. It was left to my brother to tear me finally from its grasp.

Determined as he is to be the first on the scene he always times his arrival to coincide with the doctor's departure. His timing couldn't be more perfect if he had rehearsed it a hundred times, but this morning his watch must have been fast or his spies asleep. He came early, before the doctor had finished examining me. The doctor didn't order him out as I thought he might, but he pulled the canvas screen about my bed and that small action gave me some consolation.

When we were alone Raj drew his chair up to the bed and brought up his hands in that gesture of calculation which I shall always associate with him. Like a money-lender assessing his client he holds his hands over his stomach, gently tapping the finger-tips together. There's something darkly ominous about the way his fingers lie against his body. I don't like his hands; there has never been a time when I could watch them without uneasiness.

"You're looking much better today," he said, and I nodded, still passive. "I've been having a long discussion with the doctor. There's no reason why you shouldn't get up a little."

"I'm not strong enough for that."

"You must try and get away from these surroundings for a little." He frowned with disgust at the room. "Actually, the best thing would be to move you but I don't think that's possible just yet." For all the earnestness with which he spoke those words I knew he didn't mean them. Would they try to move me when they had settled themselves so comfortably? "By the way," he

smiled smoothly, "I understand you pay the hospital bill at the end of the month. It's now the nineteenth."

"I know," I said.

"Don't you think you ought to do something about it?"

"Since you've taken charge wouldn't it be more suitable if you dealt with it?" I asked with a sudden spark of my old spirit.

He looked at me shrewdly, trying to assess the strength of my resistance. Something in my eyes must have told him that it wasn't worth much. "I'm being quite serious. You know how awkward it is when bills are outstanding."

"I do indeed. I usually pay immediately."

"Of course you do. That's the only way to do it."

"But I haven't the energy at the moment."

"I understand how you feel. This weather must take a lot out of you. But why not let me do it? Just let me have the cheque book and I'll write out the cheques for you. You're strong enough to sign, aren't you?" I shook my head; I knew how much he wanted to get his hands on my cheque book. "You're not going to be stubborn again are you? After all, I am your elder brother. I want to help you, that's what I'm here for."

I shook my head again. "I pay my own bills and write out my own cheques."

He looked searchingly at me but my mood was still passive. "If that's how you feel. But I think you're being unnecessarily dramatic."

"I haven't the energy for that either."

"I see." He drew a deep breath. "It seems that I shall have to use all the patience I have."

"What for?"

"I think you need a lecture and I think you're well enough to take it. I must do something as an elder

brother." He smiled that slow smile of his and my heart turned over to see it.

"What have I done wrong now?" I asked.

He laughed and stretched, conscious I think of his own power. "You've done nothing wrong as yet, but there is a great deal that I want to talk to you about. But I don't want to sound mean and I don't want to strain you."

"I don't think it will strain me. I've taken a lot of lecturing in this past week."

He smiled again. "Sharada is not very tactful is she? However, let me begin. I don't think you've been very fair to us this past week."

"I haven't done anything."

"No, but you've been extremely stubborn and obstinate. Sometimes you've behaved like a child. Will you promise me now to listen to what I have to say? Will you promise not to get hysterical? It's for your own good."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, firstly the woman." He dropped his cajoling manner and became quite brisk and business-like. "She's not reliable, she's not clean. You must get rid of her. Aunt Ganga says that you rely too heavily upon her. I don't think that's wise."

"She does everything for me."

"Nothing that a trained nurse can't do. Besides, it's dangerous to trust her too much. She's the vicious kind."

"What has she done?"

"Nothing as yet but I don't want to give her the opportunity." He waited expectantly for my answer but I wasn't going to commit myself.

"That's point number one," I prompted.

"Yes," he sighed, "we'll come back to that later. Point number two. You must realise the sacrifice that Sharada and Malini are making to stay here with you.

They both have homes of their own to look after and this is not a very comfortable place."

"I believe the doctor's house has all the modern conveniences," I returned.

"Please don't try to be sarcastic. You know perfectly well what I mean."

"Well? What do you expect me to do? Go down on my knees in gratitude?"

"Scarcely that. But I think you ought to show your gratitude in some way. Is it fair, for instance, to ask them to pay for their accommodation here?"

"I haven't asked them."

"No, but you've done nothing to stop the doctor."

"What should I do? It's his hospital. Should I ask him to let them stay free of charge? This isn't a charitable institution."

"Don't twist my meaning like that. You're very clever at twisting other people's words but don't try that game on me. I've had enough of it in my life."

"It depends on whose words are twisted, doesn't it?"

He stood up, visibly annoyed. "I'm not going to waste my time listening to you talk nonsense."

"It's nonsense to talk about my paying for them. I might not be able to."

"Come now," he smiled but this time my heart didn't respond, "you're not going to tell me that you are short of money."

"I might be desperately short," I said.

He drew in his breath sharply and came to stand over me. "I don't believe it."

If I am to define the exact moment when the spell was broken I should say it was then. I lost my fear when I saw the greed in his eyes. I regained my confidence when I saw that my fears had been unfounded. I realised what

a weak and contemptible creature he was when I saw his lips moist with avarice; I discovered my own strength when I realised how little he knew about me. My solicitors had kept my secrets and I was no longer afraid of him.

But we had still to act the scene through, still to complete the sequence of events.

"I don't know why you should doubt it," I continued, "you always said I would squander father's money."

"But seven hundred thousand!" he breathed. "It isn't possible."

"Six hundred and seventy-five thousand, to be precise," I said. "Why do you look so surprised? You always prophesied it. Don't you remember? 'You'll see how well she repays you,'" I mimicked, "'she'll squander the lot in five years.' Have you forgotten? Though I must admit it took longer than five years." He didn't answer and, watching the struggle in his eyes, I suddenly burst out laughing. I have never laughed so much in my life. For that matter, I have never seen his confidence shaken as I did this morning. He was almost slobbering with despair. "What about your plans now?" I asked, choking with laughter. "Do you wish you hadn't come? Is it such a disappointment to you? I'm so sorry. It's such a pity to give you all that trouble."

Suddenly he leaned down and slapped me across the cheek, slapped me with a blow so hard that I lost my balance and fell forward. My arms sprawled across my knees and my fleshless bones were exposed to his gaze. My laughter turned to tears, but not because I was hysterical, not because he had hurt me. I cried because he had, at last, seen me as I really am. I who always wanted to be beautiful in his eyes. I who would crawl to him for praise. He saw me at long last as I really am;

my knotted limbs, my wrinkled flesh, the skin that hangs like paper from my bones. He saw it all.

Yes, I can admit it now without shame. I loved him. I still love him. That is his power over me. However much he had hurt me, humiliated me, used me for his own ends, he was still a god to me. He was my youth and all the rapture of that youth, my faith and all the hunger of that faith. Even now, when I know him for what he is, I still love him. The whole of my life has been obsessed with him. How can I cut him out of it now?

Once I gave him that frenzied, unquestioning love that only the young know. Shut off in my own little world he symbolised perfection for me and there was nothing I would not do for him. Many were the times that I lied to shield him, and once I even stole. It was only a trivial sum but, as I crept into the prayer room and took the change from mother's purse, I knew that God himself could not have asked for more.

As I grew older my love grew more discerning. It found in him the polish and the finesse that the others lacked, the model on which to fashion my own life. He brought strange standards with him, a new and crude outlook on life; but I accepted them all and didn't care for the others' derision if he but smiled his approval. And I still did whatever he asked me to, as humbly as a slave before his master.

Of late I've often wondered if my desire to be other than I was really had as much to do with him as I believed. The new standards were infiltrating all around me and, even without him, I would not have escaped untouched. Now I realise that the influences around me were strong enough to keep me inviolate if it were not that he came charging through the barriers. I don't really place much importance on his influence on the outward

façade of my life; that was bound to change. My discontent with our convention-bound mode of life belonged to the time; but my discontent with myself belonged to him. He roused new feelings in me, new ideas, new desires; and I accepted this awakening because of him.

For all this he has returned nothing, nothing but this poison, nothing but this knot in my heart. Is it any wonder that I cried?

My tears, however, didn't last long. I have few tears to shed; it is only my heart that can still weep. It couldn't have been more than a minute before I righted myself, my eyes dry. "Joke over," I said, trying to speak with composure.

The minute had been long enough for him to regain control of himself. "My dear girl," he minced, "you must be more careful."

I looked at him then with eyes that were free of fear and infatuation and wondered what it was that had given him this power over me. He was fat and coarse, his eyes were greedy, his manner repulsive; and he was devoid of compassion and pity and all the emotions which make mankind divine.

"Why?" I snapped. "You wouldn't have missed that scene would you?"

He lifted his hands in mock horror. "What a way to talk."

If he had even then showed some pity for me, even then apologised for hitting me, I might have remained silent. It was not too late. I only wanted one gentle word from him.

"You're quite impossible," he said; "must you always make a scene?"

"All right, then," I answered, pulling the sheets close about me again. "Let's dispense with scenes. Let's drop the play-acting."

"Now what are you hinting at?"

"I'm not hinting at anything. I want, quite simply, to talk business with you."

"You're not in a fit state to talk about anything. You're still hysterical."

"Does that console you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know damn' well what I mean. Why do you always pretend? Do you think I've forgotten what you are?"

He eased himself back into the chair again. "All right, then, if that's the way you want it."

I was silent for a while wondering what words to use. He made no attempt to help me. He knew what I was going to say but he sat unmoving, waiting for me to exhaust my arguments.

"I know why you've come," I said at last. "I've no illusions about your interest in me. I had a letter from my solicitors which told me that you'd already been to see the house. Well, you might as well know it. Your journey will prove quite barren. I've already decided what I am going to do with the money and nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

"I hope," he said softly, "that it remains in the family." I didn't answer. "Father would hate to see his hard-earned money squandered on others." It was a cunning thing to say for we both knew how possessive father was of his fortune.

"That's anyone's guess," I answered carelessly, refusing to give thought to his words. If I were to carry out all of my father's wishes I would first have to negate the past ten years of my life. "I might, for instance," I continued, "leave it to this hospital. It would be putting the money to a better use."

"You wouldn't dare," he said grimly.

"Wouldn't I? What else wouldn't I dare do? Do you think I cannot distinguish right from wrong?"

He shrugged. "You can't shirk your responsibilities in that way."

"What are my responsibilities? Am I responsible to Sharada, who damns me with every breath she draws? Am I responsible to you, who have already broken up our family?"

"You have a responsibility to father," he said quietly, "who entrusted you with a duty."

Oh! he was clever, fiendishly clever. He knew where it hurt me most; but I could not let him see that. "My duty died with him," I answered.

"Do you deny all moral right?" he persisted. "Have I no say as the eldest son and head of the family?"

"How often have you used that phrase?" I countered. "I'm sick to death of hearing it. What have you done for the family as the eldest son?"

He winced imperceptibly. "I've tried to do my duty."

"What a fine-sounding phrase that is. What does it mean? That you quarrelled with your own father, that you tried to dispossess your own sisters, that you broke up a family. Is that the duty of an eldest son?"

I knew I had hurt him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to hurt him as much as he had hurt me.

"Is that your duty?" I persisted. "Is that the duty you expect from your children? Is that how you expect Nimi to behave?"

"You leave Nimi out of this," he said and the very intensity of his tone told me all that I wanted to know.

"Of course," I sneered, "she's got nothing to do with me now. We'll forget about all that I did for her. She's quite a stranger to me. But I wonder what she would say

if she knew you for what you really are. Would she forgive you as you refused to forgive father?"

"She is my child. She loves me."

"And were you not his child? Do you think your children are any different?"

"My children have been brought up in a proper way," he answered primly.

"And do you think we were brought up any different?"

"We lived in perpetual tension. Father always played us against each other. That's not the atmosphere for a child."

"So you've now taken to blaming father. That's quite a new angle. It's utterly false but I suppose it gives you pleasure."

"He had no right to deny me," he muttered. "None of this would have happened if he hadn't denied me."

"And I suppose you have given your children the proper atmosphere. Let me congratulate you, but forgive me if I don't believe you. Give me ten minutes with your children and I'll see how they treat you."

"What are you suggesting?" he asked, and his eyes, for once, were filled with apprehension. "Do you think you can turn my children against me? Is that what you want to do?"

"I don't want to do anything," I answered carelessly, my mind already made up. "I'm just wondering how long it will take you to realise the truth. Have you ever thought, for instance, what Nimi could have had from me? Has the idea never occurred to you that, by taking her away from me, you took away your last chance of getting your hands on the money? Didn't you have the acumen to realise what could have happened?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Never mind. It's too late now. Or is it too late? Why don't you send for her and see?"

"What should she do here?"

"Send for her," I said softly, "and take the risk. What have you to lose? Would anything I say turn her against you? Not if she has been properly brought up, as you say. And think what you would gain. Send for her and see if I dare open her eyes to the kind of man you are."

"You'd dare anything," he said and suddenly laughed, trying to break the tension in the room. "You'd dare anything. What should she do with you? She's still a child."

"Are you so afraid?"

"Don't be silly. What should I be afraid of? I know my own daughter."

"But does she know you? Aren't you afraid of what she will say if she were to know you? Why don't you send for her?"

"Because you'd say anything to break her from me. You're capable of anything."

"I learned my lessons at your feet. Should she not learn hers at mine? I loved her once, more than you could ever do."

"What do you know of love? Your heart is twisted with hate."

He shouldn't have said that. It was a challenge which I cannot ignore. Is he so blind that he cannot read this pain in my heart for what it is?

Now I know the road that I must take. I've been in a chaotic muddle since I first started to write in this book. I've known my own mind less than I've known others. I thought, like Raj, that money was the most important thing in this world. I believed that the little black box under my bed would give me the power that I needed.

Now I know better. Life is not a mathematical equation, a series of sums; I can't make up a balance sheet and underline the debts that still have to be paid. I can't detail each item of revenge and assess the punishment that each is due. I can't pretend that my little black box will complete the circle.

No, life lives through those little gossamer threads which bind men to each other. Life is eternal through the continuity of those threads. I had believed these threads that bound me to life had long been torn asunder but there is one thread which still holds. The thread which binds me to Raj and, through him, to Nimi. I cannot abandon life without breaking that thread. I must break it. Mortality is not for me unless I do.

The moon shines down upon this page and its pale light chills my fingers. For all the warmth of this night I am cold, cold as the solitary, cold as the dead. I know time will prove the doctor a liar for the moon is already at the full. Its lustre fills the sky and there are no shadows on the plain. I can pick out each twist and knot of that dead tree and there's such a quality of intimacy in this quiet night that I feel I only have to stretch out my hand to touch those branches. I think the wood would be smooth to my touch.

I must not ignore the doctor's words, however. I cannot, I dare not, assess my progress by the number of steps that I am able to take. Just now, when I tried to repeat this morning's performance, my legs failed me. Although the effort brought the tears to my eyes I could not lift my feet off the bed. I must go slowly; my body will not be trifled with. I am its prisoner and must abide its sentence.

## XVI

MY aunt arrived last night just as I was falling off to sleep. She rattled on the wooden screen and hissed her identity in a loud whisper. "Don't be afraid, it's only me." I could have retorted that no burglar would have made such a noise and no ghost appeared so substantial but instead I woke the woman and made her unbolt the door. I wanted to turn up the light for the moon had long since swung over to the other side of the hospital but she insisted on stealth, or at least her version of it. "Someone will see us," she whispered, and even the woman, still drugged with sleep, winced, so loud was the whisper.

In the cold obscurity of the night there was something rather pathetic about her round little body crouched in the chair; something child-like, something almost lovable.

"I got your message," she whispered. "What did you want to see me about?"

I had sent a desperate message to her through the woman when I found that she had not come to see me with the others. She's not a regular visitor but I had expected to see her sometime during the day. When Raj told me that she had not slept the night in the house I grew more than desperate. In view of what I want her to do for me I cannot afford to let her out of my sight.

"I'm feeling very much better, very much stronger," I began cautiously, unwilling to plunge right away into

my plans. "Do you think?" I didn't dare put my hope into words.

"You're looking very much better at any rate," she answered. "I've noticed that already. But why are you telling me? Why not the doctor?"

"I wanted to ask you first."

"But I'm not a qualified woman. I know something about nursing, of course, but my opinion is worth nothing beside his. Have you told him?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't want to tell him just yet," I answered stubbornly.

"I see," she said strangely and stretched her hand towards the lamp, toying absent-mindedly with the wick. The little flame spluttered under her abstracted touch and suddenly died.

"For goodness' sake," I snapped, moved to sudden fear by the sound of the watchman's step outside, "leave that lamp alone."

She dropped her hand into her lap. "There's no need to lose your temper."

"I'm not losing my temper. But what do you expect me to do? You come in here in the middle of the night like a character out of a cheap melodrama——"

"The trouble with you, Sarala," she interrupted, "is that you've got a tongue that runs away with you. You should learn to control it."

"If that's all you've got to say I might as well try and get some sleep. My tongue is my own and I'll use it as I like."

"It depends on whom you use it."

"I'm sorry," I said desperately, "it's only that you make me so nervous fiddling around with things like that."

"Your nerves used to be stronger than that. What is

the matter with you? Why haven't you told the doctor? Are you afraid he'll tell Raj?"

"I don't want to tell the doctor simply because I've quarrelled with him," I answered, afraid to tell her too much.

She sighed. "How many people will you quarrel with? Will you never learn your lesson? Isn't Raj enough for you?"

"What's Raj been saying about me?"

"What should he say? He hates you as much as you do him." She sighed again. "I don't know what's happened to your family. It's worse than a lunatic asylum living with them."

"What do they say?"

"If they're not quarrelling with you they're quarrelling amongst themselves. It's sickening to listen to them."

"They all want the money."

She looked at me strangely and answered: "Why do you always deceive yourselves? Is it only because of the money that you are what you are? Well," she sighed, "it's nothing to do with me. Tell me what you wanted to see me about."

I told her, chronicling each event as carefully as I could: from the day my feet first touched the floor to the abortive attempt the day before yesterday when I tried to walk again and failed.

"Could you walk now?" she asked at last.

"I don't think so." My latest failure had sapped my confidence.

"Try," she urged.

I tried, to the accompaniment of the woman's startled remonstrations. She would have come forward to stop me but my aunt pushed her aside. "You keep out of this," she said grimly.

What was it about that moment? The spirit of my aunt or the magic of the night? I got out of bed. I walked across to the wooden screen. I pushed open the door and stepped outside. I felt the mellow, moonlit air on my body and, for the first time in months, knew what it was to stand under an open sky.

"That's enough," said my aunt, helping me back to bed. "You mustn't overdo it." Her voice was dry but the exultation was all mine. How wide, how unfettered is the sky, what balm in its touch!

I lay back in bed breathless, triumphant, and as my aunt pulled the sheet over me her eyes seemed to share my triumph. "You are a pessimist," she said fondly; "why, within a week, you'll be having lunch with us in the doctor's house."

I didn't dare dwell on her words. (Even now I think it is tempting fate to repeat them.) But the sympathy she had shown encouraged me to tell her of my plans.

"If I am well enough to walk I am well enough to be moved," I said. She nodded. "Then what's to stop me from leaving this place?"

"Nothing at all," she said.

"Will you help me?" I asked.

"But of course," she answered, not understanding.

I breathed a sigh of relief and told her in a rush what I wanted her to do. She was to take the next train up to Kataul and make arrangements for me to be moved up there. The arrangements could be better handled personally than by letter. She was not to worry about the cost. Whatever it cost, I must be in Kataul within the week.

It took some time for her to understand just what I was asking of her. I couldn't of course explain to her that the bonds which tie me to Raj now lead me to Kataul and to Nimi. I couldn't tell her why I had to see Nimi again

before I died. This hunger in my heart which cries out for Nimi is something she will never be able to understand. I tried however to explain why I had to get away from the dreariness of the hospital and this point of view she did understand; but when I insisted that the arrangements must be made in silence and in secret she was appalled and at first refused to help me.

“You don’t know what you’re asking me to do.”

I had to force myself to be patient with her for I knew she was my only hope. “What exactly am I asking you to do? You said yourself that you didn’t like this place.”

“Yes. But why the secrecy?”

“Can’t you understand that I’m sick to death of the others? I want peace again, peace from Sharada’s nagging, from Malini’s excuses.”

“And Raj? Do you think you can get away from him in Kataul, where his own family are?”

“I know Kataul. I was at school there.”

“But there are hundreds of other sanatoriums.”

“But I’ve got a sentimental attachment for Kataul. I know it so well.”

“And his family are there. Is that the reason for the secrecy?” Her voice was distrustful and suspicious.

“Good gracious no!” I laughed. “I can just imagine their faces when they come in one morning and find that I have disappeared.”

She didn’t believe me. “Sarala, you’re planning something bad. I can tell that by your voice. Unless you tell me what it is I’ll have nothing to do with it.”

“I am telling you. Don’t you understand?”

“No, I don’t,” she said abruptly.

It was physical torture to try to reason with her but try I did. “I know it looks strange. Perhaps I am perverse to want to do it in secret. But can’t you see their faces

when they find out that I have gone? Won't you give me that last pleasure? After all, I'm gambling on reaching Kataul alive. Can't you gamble too?"

"I never gamble."

"Oh! Don't take it so literally. You know what I mean. Listen, if you help me I swear before God that I'll leave all the money I have to you. It's quite a sizeable sum. Can you imagine what you could do with lots of money? Can you imagine what you could do? All the people that you can pay back, all the people you can tell to go to hell. I know what your life has been. I can put it right for you again."

She smiled. "I suppose you think that's a temptation."

I didn't know what else to say and was on the point of giving the battle up for lost when she suddenly started to speak again.

"It's a great temptation. Money is the only thing in this world that matters and I've never had any. I've always had to sweat for it, beg for others' charity, be grateful for meagre gifts. Yes, I could do with a lot of money. I could have lots of servants to wait on me, I could travel, I could do as I pleased. I'm not too old to travel. People travel at seventy. There are hundreds of places I want to see." She paused and I didn't dare break into her thoughts; it was incredible to think that I had at last won her over. "But if I do as you want me to," she continued, her balance suddenly restored, "it will not be for the money. I haven't sold myself as yet and it's too late to start that game now."

"What will you do it for?" I whispered.

"I'll do it because you are a woman alone as I am. I'll do it because I know what it is to feel abandoned. I'll do it because, once, I very nearly became the sort of woman you are now."

"Then you will do it?" I persisted.

"I don't know." She stood up and stretched herself, as if bored with the conversation. "You must give me time to think. I know there's something at the back of your mind. If you won't tell me I must try and find out for myself."

"There's nothing, absolutely nothing." I tried not to speak hysterically but it was difficult. Success had seemed so close that even a saint would have grown hysterical.

"Then why do you keep writing in that little book of yours? If you want my help you must be honest. You'd better think about this too. It's too late to talk now." She started to move towards the door but I called her back, hysteria winning the battle.

"You can't leave me like that. You just can't walk away without giving me an answer. Haven't you any feelings at all?"

"I've given you my answer," she returned.

"That's no answer. Dear God! Do you think I can let you go like this knowing that you'll tell the others?"

"If it's any consolation to you," she said quietly, "I promise not to breathe a word of this to anyone. I promise."

I had to let her go. She left me with nothing settled, nothing definite and the indecision was torture to bear. I spent the night in a turmoil, wondering if I had been right to ask her, fearing she would break her promise.

My vision has cleared with the dawn and now at least I don't doubt that she will keep her promise. But will she help me? Was she the right person to ask? Who else could I have asked? There is no one else. Even the woman, sometimes I doubt her too. This morning, for instance, she tended me so strangely, her eyes mysterious, her mouth suspicious.

Am I ill, mentally ill, to suspect everyone as I do? Is my mind deranged, my heart twisted? Does suspicion belong only to the madman? Aunt should spend one hour in this room alone to know that all my suspicions are justified.

The others noticed nothing strange about me. They came and went in their blinkered ways and if they said anything at all it was to complain about the heat. The heat is telling on them all; even Raj today seemed subdued by it. He came into the room unexpectedly and saw me with the book on my lap but he made no enquiries about it. He saw my pen poised over the paper, saw the bulkiness of the pages which had been written on, but he didn't seem particularly interested. I, in turn, was so unafraid, that I was able, quite calmly, to screw the cap on the pen again and place the book on the table within his reach.

He didn't have very much to say. He asked perfunctorily about my health and suggested that if it was going to get any hotter it might be a good idea if I were to sleep outside. He kept mopping his brow with his handkerchief and I could see the sweat seeping through the armholes of his shirt. He's changed quite a lot since he's been here; he seems to have grown more careless of his appearance.

Sharada was the first to complain openly about the heat today. It has indeed been oppressive and airless; I should say there was a thunderstorm due if it weren't that there are no clouds in the sky. She fanned herself vigorously with a folded newspaper while she talked and I derived a bitter satisfaction from seeing the sweat streak the powder on her face. I had to ask her, however, to stop waving the newspaper about; every time she swung it in my direction I could feel a wave of burning air flow over my body.

"It's all very well for you," she said, "you're used to this sort of thing."

How callous can she be? Were we not born from the same womb? Do I not know what it is to feel a cool breeze caress my body?

"No one's asking you to stay," I retorted, "you can go any time you please."

"If that's how you feel I'll go today."

"Please do. Fortunately the train service is not bad. But please don't complain afterwards that I was too selfish to remember my own sister."

She stopped fanning herself then and leaned forward, curiosity fighting with greed in her eyes. "It isn't really true then that you haven't made a will?"

The question was out, the question to find the answer for which she'll endure insult and recrimination. I didn't answer but she saw something in my eyes which made her persist.

"I don't really think you have. You're just playing with us. It flatters your sense of power to do so."

"You're getting quite a psychologist."

"You needn't try to be funny. It isn't as if the money is rightfully yours. Raj says that it will come back to us in the end."

"The next time Raj says that you might correct him on a small but important point. The money will come back to you only if I haven't made a will. Only then."

"There's such a thing as duty."

"And your duty at the moment is to see that I don't make a will," I returned harshly.

She has neither imagination nor finesse, this sister of mine. She must know that her questions would tell me more than my answers would tell her. I know now, for instance, what Raj wants of his sisters. He is obviously

not concerned with their expectations but he will use them to elicit the information he needs from me. Already she must have run to him to repeat every word of our conversation and he must be sifting through every hint, every inflection. That is why he doesn't try to keep them from me; although, in so doing, he takes the risk of losing them to me. I don't think he's so certain of their antagonism to me: with Malini, particularly, he's watchful and alert and never lets her stay too long alone with me. He never relaxes. He has the patient tenacity of a buffalo that stands for hours in a few inches of murky water to get some respite from the heat. Well, I have learned patience too. I can wait for as long as I must.

But it has been a hard lesson for me to learn. Patience was a virtue I was not born with. It was I, with my impatience, who brought the quarrel between Raj and father to a head; I who, trying desperately to bridge the gulf between them, carved another gulf between father and me. It's difficult now, after so many years, to recall exactly what it was that made father lose his trust in me. The events of those far-away days have faded from my memory and sometimes I find it difficult to recapture even the feelings and emotions of those days. I know I was racked by conflict, torn between the two people who were dearest in the world to me; but I cannot exactly recall what it was that made me like that. I cannot outline the events, one by one, which led to the final rift. Sometimes I can't even remember what it was like before the estrangement came between us. I suppose that's the way it always is with the past which time has already swallowed; however much we might try to revive it we can never quite capture the mood. We can only remember that once there was a reason and a cause.

My sins have always been sins of commission. If I had been able to remain silent I might have been able to resolve the conflict. If I had not let my impatience get the better of me I might have been able to undo the damage that Raj had done. I know that Raj tried to turn father against me when he found that I was to inherit. I know that he recognised me as the enemy when father at long last disowned him and sent him out of the house. I know father's decision was impulsive; he relented within the month and wanted to call Raj back to him again but pride prevented him. He accepted the impulse because he was too stubborn to admit error. But for me, that impulse was my undoing. Raj's distrust grew to hate and though he continued to use me there was no compassion in his attitude.

I had a foretaste of the things to come when Raj's first wife died. The telegram, telling of her death, arrived as we were sitting at the supper table. Father read it first and then pushed it across the table to me. "Anita is dead," he said briefly and left the room. When I had assimilated the news, for death is never acceptable, I went out to find him.

He was sitting in a chair in the garden and there was light enough from the verandah for me to see how grey his face had become. I took my accustomed place at his feet, my head resting against his knees, and knew somehow that I was not expected to speak.

When eventually he did break the silence his voice was so brittle that it seemed to cut its way into my ears. "I want nothing to do with him. I've disowned him, cut him out of my life as one would cut a dead branch from a tree. I don't want to start all those arguments all over again. I'm too old. I want peace." He drew a deep breath. "Come. Let's forget about it. Let's

read something together. What about that article we were discussing at lunch-time; shall we read it together?"

I was aghast at his callousness and, unable to sense the battle that was raging within him, condemned him for his heartlessness. Had he lost all sense of decency? Could we coolly discuss constitutional provisions when, less than a hundred miles away, a woman had died? And what about the child? Could we leave that child without a mother now? I was brutal in my remonstrations but he didn't protest. He only looked at me strangely and asked what I wanted him to do.

"You have a duty to your eldest son," I answered pompously.

It was then that he fought against me a little, but only briefly. Who was I to judge his duty? I could never know the sense of failure that Raj had bred in him. However, what did I want him to do?

"You must go to him now. You mustn't let your pride stand in your way," I answered callously.

He smiled again, a hopeless little smile that I was to see more often as time went by. "Is it pride that keeps me from him? Go to him, if you want to, my child. There's a train in half an hour. I'll tell Ramnath to bring the car."

\*I jumped at his suggestion and was in such a hurry to catch the train that I didn't have the time to say goodbye to him. He hadn't moved from his chair and as the car moved quickly down the drive I called out a hasty farewell. He didn't answer or wave back. He knew what was to come, the strife which was to transfer itself between him and me. Yes, that evening was the beginning of the end. I can see it now. That evening I brushed my own father aside.

I brought Nimi back with me after a couple of months and our life seemed to return to normal. But under the surface, estrangement grew. It doesn't matter how; all that matters is that the strife transferred itself. Raj imbued me with a sense of guilt and I transferred that guilt to father.

## XVII

I HAD to break off my narrative rather abruptly yesterday. The doctor interrupted me. His appearance was so unexpected that for a moment I was left staring at him, my pen poised over the paper. He never comes to see me in the evening and I was so surprised to see him that I wasn't able at first to assess the tension he brought into the room with him. He seemed older and more arrogant than ever and I hated him anew.

"What are you writing in that book of yours?" he asked.

"The story of my life," I answered coldly. "Wouldn't you like to read it?"

He ignored me. "This light is bad for your eyes. Why don't you ask for a stronger one, one of those hurricane lamps."

"I wouldn't dare ask for anything. I must be content with what I am given."

He shrugged. "If you want to ruin your eyesight."

"Why not? There's little else to ruin. Wouldn't you like to read what I have written? It makes interesting reading."

"If you must write at all," he persisted, "you should write during the day."

"But they never leave me in peace during the day. They take it in relays to watch over me. Don't tell me you've joined the relay."

He shook his head. "I don't know what's happened to you. Why are you so obsessed with them? Why do you hate them so?"

"I have a reason."

"At this hour of your life there is no reason. There is no excuse to be so embittered. The past is dead but the future belongs to you. You can't go forward into it like this."

"I am what the past has made me. I cannot go into the future without carrying the past with me."

"You carry nothing with you into the future. You go naked and alone, as you were born."

"I was born without sin. I go laden with my crimes."

"You were born with sin. Your crimes will be redeemed."

"Oh for God's sake," I said suddenly, "stop preaching at me. I know what you're going to say next. You're going to offer me redemption, as the bearer offers one a drink on a tray. Well, thank you, no, I don't feel like it at the moment."

"I'm not trying to preach at you. I'm trying to help you. Your mind is twisted in some way. It is my duty to try and help you."

"I don't want your help."

"That's what you say, but I don't believe you. No man is strong enough to do without help."

"Well, perhaps I do need help but not your kind. You'll never know what it is to be lonely, to be desperate for someone to love. If you want to help me give me someone to love."

"The love of God passeth all understanding," he intoned solemnly. "When will you turn your thoughts to God?"

I laughed harshly. "My thoughts are always with God,

but you will never understand that. I pray to God as often as you mutter your prayers. There's more feeling and more need in my prayers than you will ever find in your incantations."

"But is there more peace?" he asked. "Is there more peace?"

"I'd rather live tormented than blind."

"Am I blind?"

"Yes," I answered, "you are. You have no understanding, no pity. You are blinded by your faith. What do you know of those you try to save? Have you ever seen yourself as others see you?"

"How do you see me?" he asked.

"As a mind without a heart, as a brain without reason. You've dedicated yourself to a purpose but the purpose does not belong to you. This dedication might be noble but the purpose makes your deed small. What do you know of love when you do not love those whom you serve? Is it enough to preach at your victims? Preachers have always been the bane of religion."

"How could I serve if I did not love?"

"Do you really love those around you? You're incapable of love; your heart knows nothing stronger than duty."

"And isn't duty an aspect of love?"

"No. It's only another aspect of the arrogance in you, the scorn and the contempt that you have for those around you."

"I do not condemn."

"You condemn by your silence, your withdrawal."

"I withdraw from myself too. That's difficult to do."

"And easy to say."

"We're playing with words again," he said suddenly and, as suddenly, I felt the tension thick in the room.

"I suppose it's a kind of intellectual exercise but I haven't

the time for it at the moment." His eyes looked at me coldly; but behind his eyes there was a driving urgency which I could not ignore. "I've come to tell you that I'm leaving the hospital at the end of the month," he continued, the words coming out in a rush. "I hope the new man will be able to get here before I leave."

I couldn't at first assimilate his meaning. "But what's happened?" I asked. "Where are you going? Do the others know?"

"I'll tell them tonight," he chose to answer the last of my questions and ignore the others. "I thought you should know first."

"But why should you tell me?"

"Because you might have to stay here for a few days without a doctor. I hope that contingency will not arise but if it does I want you to be prepared."

It was then that I realised what he was saying. I couldn't believe him; I wouldn't let him go. The hospital without him was unthinkable and I was terrified of what might happen to me if he were not there to look after me.

"You just can't go away like that," I protested. "What if I have another attack?"

"I don't think you will."

"But you can't regulate life by conjectures. And what's the new man going to be like?"

"No worse than I," he said indifferently. "You might get to like him better."

"But it's you I like," I said, on the verge of tears. "What shall I do with a stranger?"

"I was a stranger to you once," he returned and put his hand on my wrist, as I thought to comfort me; but then I felt his fingers on my pulse and knew that he didn't care for my feelings. I grew angry in this awareness and suddenly jerked my hand away.

"I'm not hysterical, and I'm not mad," I said, my voice as cold as his. "If you are going away there must be a reason."

"What reason should there be?"

"Don't evade my question. I know there must be a reason. You wouldn't abandon your duty without." He shrugged. "Is it anything to do with us? Have any of us said anything to you to drive you away? Sharada's capable of anything but you mustn't take any notice of her. She can't help it, she's made that way." He moved away from me and I saw his eyes linger on the little black box. "Do you know what you're doing?" I went on. "By leaving this hospital you're depriving it of a fortune. Yes, I was going to leave all my money to you but I will not do it unless you stay here."

"Another man can use the money as well."

"I don't care to give it to another man."

"Then it's not a gift that I would accept."

We talked a little more after that but said nothing that's worth repeating. He was stubborn in his silence and I was left with all sorts of conjectures to torture my mind. Has it anything to do with us? I doubt it. He wouldn't allow himself to be deflected from his purpose. Has the purpose itself proved barren? That might be the reason; he's been so indifferent of late, so detached, as if he didn't belong. I'd thought it was my fault but now I see it has nothing to do with me. Something is driving him, something which does not concern me.

I wish the woman would return. I wish I could talk to someone. He must have told the others by now but they are cruel in their manners; they must know that he has already spoken to me and yet they will not come to discuss his plans with me. He must have told them more than he has told me. Raj will make certain of that; Raj

will get possession of all the facts and leave me to stew in this uncertainty.

Of course I cannot let him go. I must find some way to stop him. He wants to leave at the end of the month; that should give me time enough to write to my solicitors. Yes, I must write to them tomorrow to make it a condition of the will that the doctor remains in this hospital. My bequest has no meaning without him.

Perhaps I have misjudged him all along, perhaps I have been harsher with him than I need have been. But I am not going to let him leave me now. He must stay, whatever the cost.

## XVIII

WHAT a miserable pig-headed fool I have been ! So devoid of common sense, so blind in my observations ! Have I really lost all sense of proportion, will I never learn to judge mankind ? I should have known what sort of a man the doctor was. I should have assessed his façade of indifference for what it was, no more than a screen to hide the man within. There is no man born as cold and inhuman as he pretended to be. There is always a breaking point, a collapse of resistance. Well, let this be my lesson. May God forgive me if ever I make such a fool of myself again.

To think that all this while I loved and revered him. I might have hated him for his rigidity and austerity but I loved him too. I admired the fixity of his purpose, the confidence of his mien. I looked to him to give me the strength which I lacked. I believed him infallible and pinned my faith on him. Yes, I know I quarrelled with him and was often rude to him but that too was part of my faith. He accepted it as such for he never really deserted me. He came back to me again and again and I, fool that I was, believed that he came because he wanted to. In spite of the barrier between us, in spite of the severity against which I rebelled, I thought I had at last found an affinity, I thought I had at last found someone who would take what I could give. Take not because of right or of duty but because of need. Fool that I was !

I should have known that nothing stronger than duty brought him to my bedside. I should have known that he cared no more for me than for his other patients. What am I to him but a name in a case-book, a record of an illness in which the spirit is too stubborn to let the body die? What does he care for that spirit?

I've lived in a fool's paradise for these past nine months. I've seen the future through his eyes, moulded my life according to his wishes. Yes, I can admit it now: I've accepted death because he would be there to shield me. He would not only close my eyes but also shoulder the burden of the curse that I should leave behind me. The curse would be absolved through him. Whether it was a new X-ray ward or a completely new wing of the hospital, he would put my money to the use which God intended and redemption would come through the lives that he saved. I could meet my past in the hereafter secure in the knowledge that I had not failed in my duty.

It was a beautiful dream. I needed a man as strong as I thought the doctor to be. I needed his confidence and his strength. However cold his eyes, however arrogant his manner, I had accepted his purpose. Now I must re-orientate myself and I don't know how.

It was the woman who opened my eyes. She came in last night as drunk as usual but her eyes were sober enough to see the uncertainty in mine. "What's been happening?" she asked, her voice blurred, "What's been happening while I've been away?"

"Do you know that the doctor is leaving at the end of the month?" I said. "He's leaving just like that without any reason."

She had to hold on to the bed to steady herself but her voice was quite clear as she took up my question. How

did I know this? Who had told me? Had the doctor himself hinted at anything?

Excitement made my voice waver but I repeated our conversation to her word for word. She sank down on the floor beside me and rested her arms across the bed. There was such a dazzling light of comprehension in her eyes that I wonder that I did not guess what she was going to say. Would I have let her speak if I had guessed? Sometimes it is consoling to be left in the dark.

"I didn't think he had it in him," she said at last. "So he is going to stand by her." I asked her what she meant but she ignored me and continued soliloquising. "We don't expect much in our lives. We are born too poor, too mean, to be allowed any demands. We must accept what comes, take what fate gives us. Sometimes this acceptance is hard. Why shouldn't it be hard when we see what fate has given to others? Is such a distribution fair? But still we must accept. That is our lot. Accept with eyes closed to the alternatives, accept because that is what the gods want."

"What the devil are you talking about?" I asked impatiently, a little frightened by the almost mesmerised tone of her voice. "What is it that we must accept?"

"Our fate, of course," she answered, "it is written down for us before we are born. Our actions do not fill the pages, they only bring out the invisible writing."

"Will you talk sense?" I asked exasperated. "What writing is this?"

She looked at me then with eyes that were as cold as the doctor's. "Don't you know what's been happening?" she asked. "Haven't you been able to put all the pieces together?"

"For God's sake what pieces?"

"Why does he go to Malegaon so often? In this last

week alone he has been there four times. Why should he have opened a dispensary in Malegaon when it is no more than ten miles from here? Some of the other patients have had to walk for over twenty. Why should he have given the dispensary in charge of that girl's father? The man is not a qualified chemist."

"What are you saying?" I asked aghast.

"Nothing that the whole hospital doesn't know. No man can ignore his manhood. It was unnatural for him to live here alone as he has done."

"I don't believe you."

"I'm not asking you to believe me. The facts are there, as large as life. He drives to Malegaon himself, leaving the chauffeur behind. He comes back at all hours of the night. Don't you remember what your sister said? Are the patients there dying off like flies?"

"My sister has a dirty mind."

"Sometimes only a dirty mind can understand what God intends."

"You're making all this up. It's a conspiracy between the hospital servants. You told me yourself that they didn't like him."

"Why should we make it up? Have we any power over him?"

"You don't like him. You don't like him because he is different, because he belongs to another world."

"He's no different," she said coldly, "he's a man like any other."

I still would not believe her. Her implications were too horrible, too foul. I asked her for proof.

"Proof?" She laughed, baring her blackened gums. "The girl is with child. It's as plain as daylight."

I had to believe her then. Something inside me broke when I heard those words but I had to believe them.

"Have you seen her?" I asked hopelessly; "what does she look like? Is she pretty? And young?"

"No I haven't seen her. But I have heard about her."

Suddenly I knew that the woman had to go to Malegaon to find out the truth. It isn't that I disbelieve the rumour but I must have tangible proof of it. The woman must go there and make this phantom girl real to my eyes.

At first she was reluctant to go. "I don't want to be mixed up in all this," she said. "It's the doctor's own business. What have I to do with him or even with her?"

"If you won't go," I said, "you can pack your things and leave tonight."

"But isn't it enough for you that he is going to stand by her? He'll marry the girl and leave this place. Isn't that enough?"

Enough? It was the last straw. I could not bear to think of it. "If you won't go to Malegaon," I repeated, "you can pack your things."

She has agreed to go. She will leave tomorrow morning. She knows exactly what I want her to find out about that girl.

Well, if it is true, and I've no doubt that it is, I'll make the doctor pay for his treatment of me. I'll make him pay for all his arrogance and his contempt. Who is he to condemn me when he himself is not free of sin? I'll publish his shame to the world. I shall see that it is not so easy for him to desert me now. He cannot treat me so cavalierly. But first I must have proof. I must have proof before I take action.

My aunt came to see me this afternoon prepared to help me reach Kataul, but somehow I don't care to think about Kataul at the moment. I have more important things on my mind.

I must, however, concentrate on Kataul. I shall go mad

if I let this fury take possession of me. I must remember that life does not stand still without me, that even now things must be happening outside my hearing which are of vital concern to me. I must recall my purpose and remember why it is that I must go to Kataul. I must not let the initiative pass from my hands to Raj's.

Aunt is prepared to help me because Raj has in some way turned her against him. I don't quite know what has happened between them but from what I can gather from the woman they had a heated argument this morning. It had something to do, I believe, with aunt's behaviour in the village. According to the woman Raj forbade my aunt to go down to the village again; it wasn't compatible with the family's reputation to have an aunt hobnobbing with the peasants as she did. My aunt must have replied that she would do as she pleased and it must have been then that Raj had tried to command her. If the woman is to be believed, he said: "I'll have nothing more to do with you if you go down there again."

Raj is a poor psychologist if he takes my aunt's resistance so lightly. He might be able to obtain obedience from his sisters but my aunt has more spirit than any of us. However, I am glad he tried to impose his will on her; if he had not she might still refuse to help me.

She asked me why she had to go to Kataul. Could I not make all the arrangements by post? A letter from the doctor would be more effective than a visit from her. I told her my reasons for secrecy then and Raj had so antagonised her that she was willing to accept them all.

I dare not put anything down in writing for my post is no longer confidential. Raj knows the times of the postal deliveries by heart and he would only have to look at the postmark "Kataul" to know what I was about. For the same reason I dare not elicit the doctor's help.

I've no doubt he'd help me now but I am not convinced that he would keep the secret. He can keep his own secrets too well but he would be careless of those that belonged to others. Aunt must go personally to Kataul because they must know nothing of my intentions until I am there myself to prove it. If they were to know of my intentions they would prevent me from leaving. They would use force if they had to.

Aunt is also leaving tomorrow. I don't think her absence will be noticed for she's often stayed away for a night or two at a stretch. If anyone asks any questions I have my alibi ready: I have sent Aunt to Malegaon to ascertain the facts behind the rumour that is racking the hospital. They are all prudish enough to accept that alibi and I must somehow prepare them for what I shall have to tell them in the end.

# XIX

THE cup is full. The end is near. I haven't very much more to do now. The cycle of my life is nearing completion. There's no moon tonight but there's something awe-inspiring about the deep blue canopy of the sky. Splashed with millions of glittering stars it looks chillingly remote, terrifyingly distant.

I asked Malini to stay with me during the woman's absence. It was rather strange to be without her but Malini has effected such an amazing transformation in my room that I didn't mind so very much. She found a new counterpane for my bed and moved the furniture around so that it almost feels as if I've been moved to another room. From where I am now I can look into the inner room and I can see a glimpse of white where the shoe-box has been tied to the ceiling and the dark bulge of the woman's bundle in the corner. The stains on the washstand, however, cannot be hidden nor the pattern on the ceiling camouflaged.

I've often wondered why I sent for Malini. She never played an important part in my life and, once I had accepted losing her to Sharada, I never gave her much thought. When the doctor told me that I must write to my brother—how long ago that seems now—I searched desperately for some names to fill the void in my memory. Outside the family I could think of none. Somehow I seem to have lost the capacity for making friends.

Malini had settled into the verandah with a book when Raj arrived and I don't think he noticed her at first. He knew, of course, that she was to stay with me but he must have thought that she'd gone out of the room on an errand.

There was grim determination in his eyes and I knew that the hour had come. It was the woman's absence which gave him the cue. He asked where she was and when I told him that she'd taken the day off he seemed grossly pleased. "Has she taken her things with her?" It didn't disappoint him that she had not. "It doesn't matter. You can always send them on to her, if there's anything important to send."

"Why should I do that?" I asked.

"You don't really believe that she's coming back?" he countered.

For one searing moment I realised what it would be to be in his power without the woman to help me. It was a frightening realisation. "You'll be surprised when you walk in tomorrow morning and find her here," I said.

"I will indeed." He smiled, grimly confident. Of course he hasn't any idea where she is and must believe me when I say that she'd asked for a day off. "Now that we're on the subject," he said, "I might as well tell you that a nurse is arriving at the end of the week. I don't think it would be wise for the woman to be here when she arrives."

This is what he has been waiting for, this nurse who will set the final seal on his plans. I don't know what he expects of her but it's obvious that he wants me alone, without any of my own. I dread to think what he will do with me when I am so defenceless, but he has laid his plans.

"That's up to you," I answered.

"My dear girl," he sighed, "listen to me. The woman is not the proper nurse for you. She's vicious and

uncouth. She may be all right when you're well enough to keep an eye on her but have you thought what she's capable of doing if left to herself?" Involuntarily his eyes strayed to the little black box.

"I'm willing to take the responsibility."

"You're quite impossible but I think the time will come when you'll admit that I'm right."

"According to you it might be too late then."

"Must you always be so stubborn? I've got so many important things to talk to you about."

"What, for example?" I asked, calmed by his obvious impatience.

He hesitated a little, as if taking counsel with himself, and then launched into his plans. It was time I began to think seriously about the future. It didn't need the doctor to tell him that I was being too frivolous about the whole thing. I might enjoy keeping them hanging around me but they all had their own duties and responsibilities. While he remained with me, for instance, his business suffered; and business was bad in any case. God knows how he could ever make two ends meet! He was quite willing to help me make my arrangements, that was why he had come; such things needed a man's hands. Would I not trust him and give matters into his hands? He would see that justice was done. He knew of course that the doctor expected something from me, all doctors were like that; but he was to be made to understand that he had no claims. In his own view, the fees were ample but if I wanted I could always make a small donation. That might be rather a good gesture after all, but it was to be no more than a gesture. As for the others, he was the head of the family and would see that they got their share. Malini and Sharada were well settled and had husbands who could look after them. Aunt Ganga, how-

ever, ought perhaps to be remembered. It might be a good idea to leave her just enough to buy a little house, not too big, just enough for herself. And if I felt that I really owed a debt to my sisters I could leave them some of my jewellery. Of course, he couldn't help me make all the arrangements if I was to continue being stubborn. If I wanted his help I must be amenable; my behaviour since his arrival had not only disgusted him but had also humiliated him. Why should he help me when I did nothing but insult him?

He spoke as if I were already dead and such was his resolution that I began to grow afraid. But then I saw Malini put down her book and come into the room, the nearest to loathing that I have ever seen on her face. Her expression restored my courage.

"Aren't you taking things too much for granted?" I asked. "Really, you're showing even less imagination than Sharada. I'm not dead yet and there's no need to read the funeral oration."

He didn't hear me. Malini's sudden appearance had thrown him off balance and his eyes were bright with anger. "I might have known that you were hiding around the corner," he said.

"That's not fair," she answered, "you knew I had come in to sit with her."

"I didn't see you in the verandah. You should have told me you were there."

"Why? I found it most interesting. Who's going to get the bulk of the fortune?" I'd never heard Malini speak like that before. I'd never believed her capable.

"You've no right to eavesdrop," he said. "Get out and leave us alone."

"I'm going," she muttered, "I don't want to listen to any more."

"Oh, no," I broke in, my voice clear and brittle, my confidence high, "since you've heard the beginning you'll hear the end." She tried to protest but I told her that she had no choice. Either she stayed or she caught the next train home. I think I was rather harsh with her; she is at heart a gentle creature and can be hurt very easily; but I could not let her go and lose my only witness.

I made her draw up another chair and then turned back to Raj again, Raj who had somehow managed to pull himself together again. "I think you've forgotten an important factor in your plans," I said. "Doesn't it all depend on whether I have already made a will or not? Or do you think you can make me sign another?"

"Come now, you're the one who's showing too much imagination. Whoever spoke of wills, or even of dying? I know you must brood a great deal but that doesn't have to make you morbid."

Oh! he was clever, fiendishly clever, but I wasn't going to let go my advantage so easily.

"It wasn't I who spoke about dying," I said.

"I know. I did but I'm only doing it for your good. It's something we've all got to be prepared for, though God forbid that it should come to you too soon. You've got many more years in front of you."

"Indeed? Has my recovery any place in your plans?"

"That's not very kind."

"I'm sorry, but would you have come if you didn't believe that I was going to die? Would you have left your precious business to look after itself if you didn't believe the doctor's opinion?"

"My dear girl," he simpered, "what a poor opinion you have of me."

"For God's sake stop play-acting. And stop calling me dear. I'm not dear to you, I don't want to be dear to you."

"All right, I won't play-act, as you call it." He looked resignedly, triumphantly, at Malini as if to ask her what he could do with a hysterical person like me; but Malini had suddenly decided to remain aloof. I think she was afraid of both of us. "Let's talk sense then, shall we?" he continued.

"Why don't you start? I don't call it sense to treat the living as the dead."

"I wasn't doing anything of the sort. You're being unnecessarily hypersensitive. But that's beside the point. I should know by now that you will always distort the facts." He sighed exaggeratedly, stealing a look at Malini; but Malini had her eyes fixed firmly on the window.

"And of course you never distort the facts."

"You see the mood you're in? You're overwrought. Solitude has made you over-sensitive. What sense can we talk?"

"And dispossession has made you cunning." I took him up swiftly. "Why don't you mention the money outright? Why are you always so finicky about it? You had no compunction in going to Old Whiskers."

He narrowed his eyes. "Who told you that?"

I laughed. "I got it straight from the horse's mouth. All of it. How you went to Old Whiskers the day before father's funeral to find out about the will. How you were even prepared to fight the will in a court of law. It's a pity Old Whiskers didn't let you. You'd have looked very silly trying to fight a will a lawyer had drawn up."

"The money was mine. I was his heir. He had no right to keep it from me."

"The money was his own. He'd earned every penny of it. He could dispose of it as he wished. What had you done to prove your rights? Is it a claim to fight with your

own father and have him dispossess you? Doesn't that deny the right?"

He stood up suddenly. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to you."

"Don't you like the sound of the truth? Do you think people don't know how much you quarrelled with your own father? Do you think that they don't know that he disowned you long before he died? Do you really believe you had a claim on him, after the way you treated him?"

"I'm not going to listen. Anyone would think that you're out of your mind."

It was then that I lost what little control I still had over my temper. The sight of him, pretending a righteous indignation he did not feel, snapped something in me and brought all the pent-up hatred of my life to the top.

"Is that what you're going to say now? You've said that I've taken your rightful inheritance from you. You've said that I poisoned father's mind against you. You've said that I was only waiting for father to die in order to get my hands on his money. Are you now going to say that I am mad? Will that give you a right to the money? Is there a court case there?" My voice was hysterical and Malini put out her hands to me in consternation, but I shook myself free of her. "Before God, Raj, you will never get that money. Never, do you hear! Never!"

He hadn't missed Malini's concern. He sat down again.

"Sarala." His voice was sharp. "Pull yourself together. All this is in the past. It's dead. There's no need to make a scene about it."

"It's not dead. It will never die. The hell you've made of my life will go with me into eternity. The things you've made me say and do, the guilt you've made me carry. Do you think I can ever forget? Do you think I can drop that burden just like that, like a porter does his load?"

No, but by God, you'll carry some of that burden yourself now. You're impervious to any argument but that of money. Well, I have the money now and you will die regretting what you did to me."

I was beyond reasoning, feverish in my impatience. I made Malini lift the little black box from under my bed and fumbled for the key around my neck. The paper I wanted was at the bottom and I could feel his eyes on the contents of the box as I scrambled through them to find it.

My hands were trembling as I held it up, brittle, yellowing, cracking. "Do you know what this is?" Instinctively he put out his hand, recognising the writing, but I held it away from him. I asked Malini to read it aloud and her shoulder touched mine as she leaned over me.

The sound of those well-remembered words, spoken aloud for the first time, had the power to soothe me. My hysteria died as I watched his hands, the fingers clenching spasmodically.

" . . . my temper quite ragged. I know it's the heat and I should come up to you for a change but that succession case", Malini had difficulty in reading the faded writing, "won't allow it. It's going well and I must steer it through to the end. But he's quite insufferable, cruelly selfish. I dread to think what he will be as a man. Should I trust him so much? Dare I expect anything from him? Perhaps I shouldn't be telling you this but, dear heart, there have been no secrets between us yet. There's a streak of hardness in his character which frightens me. When I look at him I understand why God saw fit to take the others. One is enough. When you return I intend . . ."

That was all. A sheet from a letter without beginning or end. A fragile, crumbling piece of paper on which the ink had long since faded. But that letter has been my only

consolation through all these bitter years; without it I should have gone mad a long time ago.

"I wonder what you did?" I asked. "Was it money that you stole or was it something else?"

"You've no business with that letter," he answered, "it's not addressed to you."

"Of course it isn't. You don't think he would have written to me like that? It's mother's."

"What are you doing with it then?"

"Don't you remember? He left everything to me. I found it among his papers and you can't imagine the time I spent looking for the rest of the letter. I wanted so desperately to know what you had done. It doesn't really matter now but to think that I once very nearly burned it. The contents of that drawer didn't look so important and I nearly sent them to the bonfire without bothering to examine them. Wouldn't that have been a tragedy? To burn the only thing that told me that your quarrel had nothing to do with me? To burn the only proof that I have?"

"It was written long before the quarrel. It had nothing to do with it."

"But there you are. He hated you long before you ever left home. The quarrel began before I was ten. And yet you made me believe that it was I who came between you. You bullied me into thinking that if it wasn't for me he'd have kept you by his side. How cleverly you did it! I was poisoning father's mind against you, I was adding fuel to the fire. I wanted the money and was determined to see you dispossessed. You were very clever."

"You've no right to jump to conclusions from this one sheet of paper."

"As much right as you had to accuse me. Don't you remember what you said?"

"What did I say?" he asked.

I fell into the trap. "You told me that a time would come when I would fail my father. You told me a time would come when I would hurt him as he'd never been hurt before."

"Well?" he prompted, his eyes gleaming.

I couldn't answer and my silence told him all that he wanted to know. He stood up, triumphant; and I cursed myself for a fool. I should never have told him that. There's no need for him to fight any more. "I hope the money has made you happy," he said softly and his eyes raked the room.

"At least you will never get your hands on it. If it's the last thing I do I'll see that you never have it. You or yours."

He left the room and I had to let him go. I couldn't trust myself to say another word. Already the reaction had set in. I didn't realise I was so tense until Malini tried to take the letter from my hand. My fingers were clutched so tightly over it that her action, though gentle enough, tore the paper into two. The sight of that precious paper destroyed broke my spirit. "Now look what you've done," I said and started to cry; not silently but in great gasping sobs that could not have been pleasant to hear. Malini tried to soothe me but when I wanted to tell her why I hated Raj she would not listen. "You mustn't try to talk now, you must be quiet," she said.

What a chicken-hearted coward she is. What is she afraid of? Does she think I want to drag her into my affairs? Does she think I care whether she listens or not?

When they first diagnosed my disease they arranged for an ambulance to take me to the hospital for the operation. I lay in a chair in the verandah, waiting for the

ambulance to come, and father—so terribly aged—sat beside me. Seeing his weary eyes I tried to make amends for all the bitter words that had been our only form of communication for many months.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm dreadfully sorry."

He didn't understand me. He thought I was afraid of the operating table. "It won't be as bad as all that," he said.

"I'm not afraid to die," I said harshly, "that would be too easy a way out."

He still did not understand me. How could he understand me when I had become a complete stranger? "What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Why are you so cynical?"

"Wouldn't that be the easy way out?" I persisted. "No more arguments. No more quarrels."

"Oh, my child, what has happened to you? You never used to be like this."

"Now you see how right Raj was. He always said I'd turn out the worst of them all."

"Can't you leave Raj out of this? What has Raj done to you that you should be so bitter against him?"

"He's set you against me."

"He's done nothing of the sort." It was father's turn to be harsh. "It's you who have set me against you. I've done my best by you and all you have ever returned are these bitter words. Was ever a man hurt as you have hurt me?"

"I've learned my lesson well," I said bitterly.

"There you go again. What is the matter with you? Why must you hate all the time?"

"I have every reason. Don't I know that Raj wants to get his hands on the money?"

"Money. Money. Is that all there is between us now?"

"It's all that matters."

"Dear God!" His face crumpled up and his eyes filled with tears.

"You believe him, I know you do. You'd think I'd do anything to get the money. You interpret every word I say to that purpose. You told me only yesterday that I was obsessed with the idea of the money. Well, I am. I'd do anything to stop him getting it."

"Oh, my daughter, what have I done to you that you should treat me like this?"

Has anyone heard his father cry? Has anyone? Only he who has will understand what it was that drove the next words out of me.

"Anyway, what are you so worried about? You're not dead yet."

I never saw him again. He was to come and see me after the operation but fate willed it otherwise. Did I kill my father? If the wish is father to the thought then I did. I sent him to his death as inexorably as if I myself had driven the car into that tree.

Is it any wonder that I hate my brother so? Of all the things that he made me do this was the most horrible, the most cruel. I shall never close my eyes but I shall see those tear-filled eyes turned upon me. I shall never be still but I shall hear the sound of those tears. I shall never dream but I shall wake, screaming with pain. Is it any wonder that I hate? For I loved the man who drove me to this deed.

I was so absorbed in writing that I did not hear the woman return, did not see the cup of milk which she placed on the table beside me. When at last I did look up she was standing over me, arms akimbo, prepared to scold. But there was something in my face which turned

her scolding into pity. Swiftly she bent down to take the pen from my fingers. Gently she cradled my head as she held the cup to my lips. The milk was too hot to swallow and she blew on it to cool it. "What have they been doing to you?" she muttered. "Can't they look after you for a day without making trouble? Come now, drink this and go to sleep. You'll feel better tomorrow. Come. Drink. I've come back again and there's no need to be afraid."

She laid me back on the pillows and soothed my forehead with her fingers. There was magic in her touch and mesmerism in her voice and slowly my brain stopped and my eyes closed in sleep.

I was wakened by the sound of an owl hooting eerily in the darkness. I opened my eyes and for one dreadful moment thought that I was dead. The night was deathly quiet and the darkness all-enveloping. I searched frantically for my bearings, forgetting that Malini had changed the position of my bed; and then the owl hooted again and I remembered where I was.

I have not been able to go back to sleep and so have turned up the lamp and taken up this book again. The woman snores loudly beside me but all else is silence, the heavy, impregnable silence of the witching hour when only spirits stir. This is the hour when I know that my time is short, that I must hurry.

I have tried, God knows I have tried, to atone for all the mistakes of my life. I have punished myself, mortified, scourged myself; and I have learned, never more so than now, that atonement is impossible. It never was possible.

I remember lying in the hospital after the operation churning the words of atonement over and over again in my mind. I knew just what words to use, I knew just how I would make my apology and beg my father for his

forgiveness. It wasn't too late to start again. It's strange that I was able to find the right words just when they could never be spoken.

On his way to the hospital father went to see Old Whiskers. He wanted to make another will abrogating the first and leaving me with nothing. If he had been a stronger man he would have instructed Old Whiskers to draw up the will; but all he did was to tell him of his intentions. He said he would return on his way back from the hospital and discuss the matter further.

Was I wrong to ignore father's last wish? Was I faithless to close my ears to his last message? Remember that he might have given me another chance. Remember what my brother did to me.

Old Whiskers thought I was wrong. He who had known me as a child gave me his verdict. "You will never be happy unless you abide by your father's dying wish," he wrote to me. My heart was so knotted with hate that I refused to listen to him. I kept what was not mine and paid for every penny that I inherited with my soul's blood.

The money has not made me happy. It has given me all the creature comforts that I need but it has offered no solution to the conflict in my heart. It has burdened me with guilt and reproach. It has denied me absolution. I've tried so hard to tell myself that all that happened was outside my control, that father would have forgiven me if he had known; but the facts are incontestable and the dead do not speak.

The dawn has started to tint the sky and I can see the shadow of the forest. How inscrutable is that forest, how tenacious of its secrets! It's something like me, black, foul and repulsive, dehumanised by a vow that was broken, a faith that was betrayed. No, I have no illusions about myself any more. I am not fit to live.

## XX

ALL Hell's been let loose here and so much has happened in so short a time that I am dizzy with confusion.

It started with the woman. She rushed into the room this morning with the tears streaming down her face, her hair on end and her clothes in complete disorder. She sobbed out a disjointed story about what Raj's servants had done to her but her voice, normally so gentle, was harsh and grating, and I could scarcely make sense of her words. The tears made her eyes ugly and when she pulled her blouse apart to beat her breasts I could see how withered they were, scaled and fibrous with age. "I'll put ashes on my head, I'll put mud in my mouth," she kept repeating, matching the gesture to the words with such histrionic skill that I could almost see the ash streaking down the wrinkles of her face.

I found her dramatics slightly disgusting but it seemed to charm the crowd which soon collected outside, attracted by the noise. They pressed their noses against the wooden screen and fixed their eyes avidly upon her. I should think everyone who could walk was there. Old men with greedy eyes, women with backs arched in pregnancy, children with slobbering mouths—I haven't seen so many people together for a long time. They looked like vaguely familiar creatures from another world but if they'd started to howl and cough like the noises of the night I

would not have been surprised. They were huddled together in a brown, unmoving mass, monstrous in their curiosity.

I didn't try to interrupt the woman. I don't think she could have heard me if I had. She was in an absorbed frenzy, so completely detached from her surroundings that I wonder if she knew to whom she was talking. I waited for the frenzy to exhaust itself as patiently as I could and occupied my time by trying to single out the two children from the crowd outside. I couldn't find them but there were two men standing at the back, crisp in their white drill, whom I knew at once for my brother's servants. One of them had a little black moustache and the teeth of the other were bared in a smile which could have been amusement or scorn.

The noise the woman made was bound to attract the doctor in the end. He arrived, hesitant for all his haste, and made straight for my bed. He leaned over to feel my pulse and heart and, finding nothing amiss, straightened up with a look of such bewilderment on his face that I suddenly burst into laughter. I couldn't help it. I laughed till the tears rolled down my cheeks and the muscles in my stomach contracted with pain.

I can't imagine what our silent audience must have thought of the scene. The sound of my laughter was drowned by the woman's shrieking but the expression on my face must have been quite unmistakable.

The doctor recoiled, that fantastically bewildered look still on his face. Still unable to control myself I pointed to the woman. Comprehension dawned slowly but when it did he stepped up to her and slapped her across the cheek. The silence that followed the impact of his hand was that of the grave. The woman stopped shouting, I stopped laughing and the crowd outside hardly dared to breathe.

"Get out of here," the doctor ordered in a hard, toneless voice; and, surprisingly enough, she obeyed him at once. He went into the verandah and repeated his order to the watchers at the screen and they too disappeared as quickly. Only the two at the back lingered and he had to repeat his order. More quickly than it takes to tell my room was back to normal, the empty plain outside and no sound to disturb the quiet of the room but my laboured breathing.

He mixed me a sedative and, for the first time in my experience, sat down in the chair beside the bed. Perhaps it was seeing his face on a level with mine when I had never seen it otherwise than towering above me that made me apologise.

"I'm sorry, doctor; it wasn't fair to drag you out like this. You look tired."

He brushed his hands over his face. "I'm dead tired," he said.

It was then that I remembered the girl and wondered fleetingly what had happened about her. He didn't look like a man preparing for happiness.

"But you're not dragging me out," he continued, "I have to go out again in any case."

"I'm sorry," I said. "But you've only got another ten days to go. The last days are always the most difficult to bear."

He looked at me strangely and was on the point of saying something when the woman returned and he had to give his attention to her. "What's the matter?" he asked sternly. "Have you gone mad?"

She shook her head mutely, as stubbornly silent as she had a little while ago been vociferous. He sighed and stood up, looking at his watch. "Find out what it is about, will you? I must go." The tone of his voice gripped

my heart. He hadn't spoken to me like that for so long.

Slowly, with infinite patience, I got the story out of the woman. It seems that Raj's servants have been following her for many days. Ever since that first moment of antagonism they have singled her out for special attention and though they have been as aloof as ever they remain on her track. They follow her into the village, dog her footsteps in the hospital grounds and there's no place where she can be free of them. When she first began to suspect them of following her she tried to check their movements in her turn and was told by the potter's wife that they were always asking questions about her. They made no secret of their interest and she soon became a standing joke in the village. "I can take a joke better than most," she told me, "but they've made the whole village suspicious. I can't buy anything now without paying cash down."

I asked why she didn't have it out with them and she told me that she did try but they never answered her. They only laughed and turned their backs. This morning, they met her coming out of a shop and she, at the end of her tether, shouted at them to leave her alone. Their answer was to strike her. They were very rough; there's a bruise on her arm and another on her face.

I knew she wasn't telling me the whole truth and I asked her what the shop was.

"The money-lender's." She had the grace to look ashamed. "But I only wanted a small loan from him."

"I suppose the boy has taken all that I gave you?" my voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"It isn't as if I am rolling in wealth as some people are," she answered sullenly.

I let that pass and questioned her more fully about the

scene outside the money-lender's. "We'll talk about your reasons for going there in a moment," I warned.

"I suppose I shouldn't have shouted at them like that but I lost my temper. Who wouldn't? They were waiting on the doorstep. They must have heard everything I said."

"Was there anything to hide?"

She dropped her eyes. "I was minding my own business."

"So they beat you up just because you were rude to them?" My voice was sceptical and she searched for a plausible explanation. I am sure I would have got the truth from her eventually, for she was quite transparent; but at that moment Raj came into the room, Raj in a mood that made me afraid. There was an air about him which told me that he had done with waiting, that he was going to take matters into his own hands whether I wanted it or not.

"I want to speak to you alone," he said. I didn't want to send the woman out of the room for I dreaded what he had to say. "If the woman has finished," he persisted, "she can go." Meekly I signalled her to leave.

He watched me in silence for a while, his glance so scathing that I became again the child of fifteen years ago. Damn him, I think he enjoyed that moment of suspense.

At last he put his hand in his pocket and took out a pair of pearl ear-rings. "You'd better have these back," he said.

I looked at them. They were single pearls, hanging like tear-drops from a golden ring, and the screw of one of them was loose. I took them in my hands and fiddled with the screw, trying to tighten it as I had tried so often before.

"You're not surprised," he said. "I suppose she's done this sort of thing before?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He brought his hand down hard on his knees. "Come, Sarala. This is not the time for joking."

"I quite agree. Will you tell me what all this is about? What should I do with these?"

"I suggest you put them back in the box from where they came."

"I would if I knew which box they came from."

"Are you trying to tell me that they do not belong to you?"

"I'm not trying. I'm telling."

He did not believe me. He accused me of trying to shield the woman. "Your mind is so warped that you can't see reason."

"But surely I wouldn't disown pearls like this?" I asked coolly. "They must be worth quite a lot. Have you seen the colour of this one?"

Oh! It was hard to be facetious, hard to pretend. If I were to let myself now think of what the woman has done to me I could scream in agony. However, pretend I did, and heard Raj out with a careless smile on my lips.

The woman had taken the ear-rings to pawn at the money-lender's. I don't know how she got hold of them, the key has never left the chain around my neck. His servants caught her with them in her hand and when she couldn't explain what she was doing with them they had been rough with her. "She deserves a sound thrashing," said Raj. "I'd give her one myself."

"She could have you up for assault," I countered.

"She wouldn't dare. But will you listen to me now and give her notice? She must leave today."

I shook my head. "I cannot dismiss her for that. The ear-rings might have been stolen but they don't belong to me and I have no right to accuse her."

"My God ! You are mad !" he said. "What will you not do to keep her with you ?"

"And what will you not do to take her from me ? Don't you think I know what you are about ? You want to take her away from me as you have the others. You've set your servants on her to hound her like a criminal. Don't you think I know why ?"

"I did my duty."

"Damn your duty," I exploded. "I wish to hell you'd get out of here and leave me alone."

I had to send him away even though he could have told me so much more ; but I couldn't stand his eyes upon me when the truth was so close to the surface.

I was so obsessed by his suspicions of the woman that I jumped out of bed to see what I could find in her bundle. I believed every word that he had told me but I wanted some tangible proof. Realisation of her treachery is a bitter pill to swallow ; but I must have a reason other than the one Raj has provided. If it means signing my own death-warrant I will not dismiss her because of what he has found out. That would be surrendering to him.

Unfortunately there was nothing in the bundle, absolutely nothing. Just a couple of torn blouses, an old sari and a blanket ; nothing that I could remotely have associated with me. Nothing that could confirm or deny Raj's words. I didn't give up the search but continued searching around the room, looking for possible hiding places.

So occupied was I that I did not hear Sharada come into the room. She must have stood watching me for some time but she didn't speak until I turned back towards my bed again.

"Well !" she breathed at last when I stood face to face with her. "And how long has this been going on ?"

"I wanted some water," I muttered, frantic for an excuse.

"There's a glass beside your bed." She can be ferociously relentless when she wants. "Or does it taste better when it comes from the inner room?"

I walked towards the bed and she made no attempt to help me. Perhaps I should have tried to stumble but my legs were too strong and steady.

"It's obviously not the first time," she commented, missing nothing. "Do the others know about this or is this one of your little secrets?"

Mention of the others jerked me upright in the bed. "Sharada, you're not to tell the others, do you understand?"

It was the wrong thing to say.

"And who is to stop me? What's at the back of your mind, Sarala? Why should you pretend to be dying when you're as strong as this?" Suddenly her eyes opened wide with comprehension. "I think I know what you're up to. It's just like you. You're planning to leave, to steal away quietly at night when we're asleep. That would be just your idea of a joke. That's it, isn't it?" she persisted when I would not reply. "Of course it is. It's written clearly on your face. My God! What fools we have been! Just wait till the others hear about this."

She stormed angrily out of the room and I was left with a terrible sense of futility. All my plans have been shattered now; it won't be long before they discover everything. What was the use of all this careful planning when the purpose can be foiled in a second? He'll take matters into his own hands now and there'll be no need to pretend. It's open warfare now.

They haven't come to see me yet. I had expected to hear something from them by now but they have all, the

doctor included, decided to keep away from me. They haven't even sent word. I suppose they are discussing what they should do. I wish they would come. They can't leave me in this uncertainty for ever.

The woman, however, is still with me. For what she's worth she's still faithful. She is silent and subdued but she hangs around me like a dog around its master. I suppose I should say something to her. I suppose I ought to punish her. But I loathe the sight of her and can't bring myself to speak to her. They have tied my hands; I can send her away as little as I can keep her with me.

## XXI

SHARADA and Malini were gathered about me in pious disapproval when my aunt returned. So inflated were they with their sense of mission that the room seemed too small to hold them. They had obviously not lacked for sleep and in their crisp starched cottons they had the prim, raw look of newly inducted and zealous young clergymen.

They didn't say anything about yesterday though they made their disapproval quite plain. My secretiveness has antagonised them more than anything else I have done and even Malini can summon no sympathy for me.

Raj's absence from this family gathering was ominous. The woman told me that he left in his car early this morning and I knew perfectly well that he had gone to set the seal on his own plans. I also knew that they were somehow marking time till his return. I knew that perfectly well though they said nothing about it themselves. They just sat like angry Furies in my room, grimly determined not to let me out of their sight.

Against their smooth freshness my aunt looked like an urchin, brought in perhaps to amuse the prince's daughters. She was sweaty and dishevelled but somehow youthful and resilient. "How cool it is in here," she said; "it's like an oven outside." She helped herself to some water, sucking it down in sibilant gurgling draughts. "How cool

you all look. And how clean. I don't think I've had a bath for days."

I tried desperately to catch her eye to warn her into silence but Sharada had already taken possession of her. I waited my opportunity with ill-concealed impatience, knowing how thin was the thread that bound her to secrecy. My impatience wasn't lost on Sharada; even as she spoke she watched me with hawk-like eyes, suspicion mounting.

"Where on earth have you been all this while?" she asked. "Don't you know what's been happening here? How could you disappear like that without letting us know?"

Malini faithfully added her contribution. "Oh, Aunt Ganga, we've looked for you everywhere."

"Well!" said my aunt, surprised. "It's good to know that I've been missed. But what's wrong? What's the trouble?"

"Nothing," I snapped, feeling events moving too quickly out of my control again. "Don't you know they always make a fuss about nothing?"

"Nothing? Is that what you call it?" Sharada exploded.

"Children, children," soothed Aunt Ganga, coming to sit on my bed; "can't you ever talk to each other without losing your tempers?"

While Sharada paused to draw breath I put in a quick question. "Is everything all right?" Impatience was already getting the better of caution but I did try to speak softly. Not softly enough for Sharada however.

"Is what all right?" she asked. "What are you two planning now? I know there's something in the air. I can feel it."

"Oh, for God's sake, stop making a scene," I said, calmed by my aunt's nod of confirmation.

"Then what is she nodding at you for?" Nothing missed Sharada. "Do you know what she's been up to? Would you believe it? She's been quietly planning to leave without us knowing. She wanted us to walk in one morning to find she'd gone. That's the thanks we were to get."

"Oh! So you do know about it."

"For God's sake!" I cried, but it was too late. Sharada's suspicions were wide awake now.

"I knew it," she said, jumping up from her chair. "I knew it. You're both in this together. Why, I think you've been away to plan this escape. You disappeared on her instructions. I can see it all now."

"You're talking rubbish," I said. "Aunt has been to Malegaon. She had to see about something urgent there."

"She's been to Malegaon has she?" said Sharada slowly. "Then she knows what's been happening there?"

"What has been happening there?" asked my aunt.

"But you've been there. You should know. It's a very small place." Sharada laughed exultantly. "Don't tell me you don't know?"

"What has been happening there?" my aunt repeated, suddenly attentive.

"The dispenser's daughter killed herself yesterday, that's all. But perhaps you were so absorbed in your business than you didn't hear the news. It came through yesterday evening."

Aunt's sudden expression of horror was not lost on any of us. "No," she whispered, "oh, no."

Sharada turned in triumph to Malini. "You see, Malini, she doesn't know what's been happening there. She never was in Malegaon. Do you think she would not have heard the news if she was there? I tell you they are in this together. I knew it all along."

I didn't pay much attention to what she said for the

expression on my aunt's face stupefied me. She seemed to crumple in her chair and the lines of age on her face were very clearly marked. "It's a judgement," she breathed, "it's a judgement. I should never have gone to Kataul. I should never have left that poor child alone. It's all my fault. I knew she would do it." She stood up and stumbled towards the door, the spirit drained out of her.

I tried to stop her. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"To Malegaon," she answered.

"But you can't go away and leave me now."

"I must," she muttered, "I must."

"But you can't do anything. The girl's dead. Your duty is to the living."

"I should have thought of that four days ago."

"But what about me?" I asked frantically. "What about Kataul?"

She drew herself up, dignified and majestic as I'd never seen her before. "The arrangements are made and the ambulance will be here on Saturday. You will be well looked after."

"But you can't leave me," I persisted.

"I want nothing more to do with you or your family," she said. "I wish I had never listened to you. You don't need my help. Your money will buy you anything."

"It can buy you things too."

She shook her head. "It can buy me nothing beyond the death of this girl. If it weren't for you she might be alive today. I could have helped her."

"But she didn't kill herself because of me," I cried.

"It's the doctor you should blame."

She didn't seem surprised to hear that. I think she knew about the whole story from the beginning. "It's too late to blame anyone now," she said. "But I'm going. I don't want to see any of you again."

I don't think I shall see her again. I feel that she has dropped out of my life completely, disappearing as suddenly as she came. Her departure is characteristic of her but her parting words will remain with me till I die. I suppose I should hate her for abandoning me so suddenly but I know she is right to do what she did. Henceforth I am on my own and must act alone.

The others weren't able to comprehend much of what my aunt and I said to each other but Sharada understood enough to know that all her suspicions were justified. She rounded on me and I made no attempt to deny my conspiracy. How could I deny it when she had heard it all from my aunt's lips? But when she asked me what the doctor had to do with the girl in Malegaon I grew stubborn and silent. I was not going to betray the doctor to her. His blood at least would not be on my hands.

"You are a sly one," she breathed; "wait till Raj hears about this."

As fate willed it Raj did hear of it immediately for he entered the room at that moment. "What is it that I should hear of?" he asked.

Looking at him I knew that the end had come. He had lost all his diffidence and uncertainty. He was once again the cool, smooth visitor that the doctor had brought into my room a couple of weeks ago. I don't think I was afraid to know that the end had come; I was just prepared to accept it as inevitable. I knew what he was going to say before he spoke.

He heard Sharada's story out in silence, a story to which Malini now and again nodded confirmation. He didn't look at me. He didn't even look at the little black box. His eyes were fixed attentively on his sisters.

When Sharada had finished talking he turned slowly to me, his eyes blank of feeling. "For once in our lives,"

he said with an empty smile, "our minds are working together."

I didn't ask him what he meant. I think I knew.

He pulled a telegram out of his pocket and showed it to me. "It seems there will be two ambulances here on Saturday. Should I cancel one or would it be wiser to have two?" His voice was coolly scathing and despair had me in its grip. "I didn't think you'd choose Kataul," he said; "but when the nurse wired me that an enquiry had come from my aunt I naturally put two and two together. I agree with you that it would be the best thing for you to move from here and Kataul is the obvious choice. My wife is up there and she can look after you better than any of us here can."

I knew this would happen. I knew that he'd learn sooner or later about my plans and would have his own counter-attack made. I don't see his agreeing to my going to Kataul as surrender. I see it as just another move in the last stages of the game that we must play out. The end is near now but the closing scene has still to be played out together. Ironically enough, our moves must be the same; we must end in unison as we began. That is the command of fate.

I am not afraid. I have long given up hope and accepted despair. I knew how it would be. The thread that binds us together must at last pull us together again. We have no entity apart. . . .

The woman has just been into the room. I took no notice of her at first, thinking she was preparing to go out; but then I looked at the clock and saw it was long past the hour that she should have left.

"I'm not going," she said quietly, catching my glance.

I asked her why not and she suddenly came to crouch down on the floor beside me and the hands she put on mine were moist and trembling. The girl's death has moved her greatly and she is in the mood for repentance. She muttered a lot of nonsense about sin and punishment and begged me to forgive her for what she had done. She's terribly afraid; at the moment she is lying on the floor beside me, her head muffled in a blanket—and occasionally she moans.

"God have mercy on her," she said to me, "have mercy on us all."

I forgave her because of her fear but I insisted that she did not breathe a word of what she had found out in Malegaon to anyone. As aunt had said, it is too late to blame anyone now and I will not have Sharada burying her dirty fingers in the doctor's affairs.

The woman wasn't able to see the girl when she went to Malegaon but she found out enough to confirm our suspicions; and the story of the girl's suicide is now public enough. It seems that she had poured paraffin over herself and set herself alight. The smell of burning was all over the house.

"But she never said anything about her reasons for doing it," the woman told me; "she kept silent to the end."

I think the woman admires the girl for keeping silence. She accepts the deed as inevitable and sees no necessity for recrimination. In her mind fate must be accepted and honour is due to the girl for that acceptance.

I don't think I see it in the same way. The girl might have kept silent from loyalty or shame; but would she have done it if she knew what the doctor was prepared to do for her? I doubt it and yet there's a feeling at the back of my mind which tells me that she had no choice.

I do not believe she acted in despair or even in fear. I could almost believe that she was ecstatic. Perhaps it was her gesture of assertion, defiance in renunciation, fulfilment in destruction.

I wish I knew what the girl was like. She was only a simple village girl, unlettered, untaught. She was to see no more of this world than the mud walls of her village and the thick black depths of its wells. What was this stranger to her? A god from out of the story-teller's legends? Or just a thing for her instinct to accept? What has she lost? What has she gained?

I cannot get that girl out of my mind. In the darkness of this night she has become more important to me than Raj or any of the others. I can see her before me now, the flames whirling about her breasts, her face dissolved in fire. She stretches out her hands to me in a gesture of supplication. But there is a quietness in her tortured body which I shall never know.

She had courage, tremendous, magnificent courage, the courage which I lack. She knew what she had to do. She knew what the future would be if she were to live on. Living is not a duty, a compulsion. It is one's duty to end life when living is no longer possible. Why continue to grovel before life when release is so easy?

They are wrong when they say that the suicide is a coward. They're utterly wrong. The coward lives on, regretting, ever regretting. It's the brave who die.

## XXII

I KNOW now why Raj wants me to go to Kataul. It's a devilish intention but somehow I am not afraid. It's as if Nimi has become my talisman against all misfortunes and I am confident, in every cranny of my twisted heart, that she will not fail me. She might hate me for what I shall do to her. Her lips might curl in scorn and she might deride me for what I am. In later years she might look upon these days and wish that she had never set her eyes upon me. She might dismiss me as an obsessed lunatic but she will not fail me. She is my absolution as that girl is the doctor's.

His appearance shocked me a little. Remembering the girl in Malegaon I would have had him cloaked in tragedy. I had imagined her so utterly at peace that her action must surely have disturbed the other. But he had changed in no way; there wasn't a line on his face to express tragedy. He had shaved recently and there were still a few specks of white on his cheeks from the towel that he had used. His skin seems to be impervious to the sun and in a climate where the flesh wilts and turns sallow I've often marvelled at the pinkness of his complexion.

He went through his ordered routine without a trace of emotion and the image of the girl came freshly before my mind again. I wondered that he could be so self-possessed. When he had finished measuring out the

medicines he came over to take his accustomed place at the foot of my bed. He clasped his hands behind him and I waited for him to take his leave. I don't think I would have dared to question him about the girl.

"You'll be leaving for Kataul in three days," he said. "I want you to know that you go without my consent. In my professional opinion you have not the strength to be moved. I know you appear to be mending rapidly. I have been told, though not, I regret, by you, that you are able to get out of bed and move about the room. This has no bearing on your case. It means nothing. The move would tax the strength of the healthiest of my patients. It will break yours." He spoke carefully, as if forcing himself to choose the right words.

"Do you mean," I asked as carefully, "that I might not reach Kataul alive?"

"That is my professional opinion which I must give for what it's worth. I have already told your brother. If my orders stood any chance of being obeyed I would forbid you to leave."

"And what is your personal opinion?"

He unclasped his hands and his body seemed to sag a little. "If I could afford it I would myself pay for the ambulance to take you away."

His words startled me out of my calm. "You can't mean that?"

"This is not a place to die in," he said.

"But I stand a better chance of living if I remain."

"What use to live if the soul is dead?" There was an undertone of bitterness in his voice which I had not heard before.

"But you will be leaving very soon yourself," I said. "I don't care to stay here when you are gone."

He looked at me coldly and clenched his hands behind his back again.

"I am not leaving after all," he said. "I have decided to stay on."

"What about the other man who is coming?"

"I had a letter this morning to say that they could not replace me."

"And is that why you've decided to stay on?" I asked, not attempting to hide my disbelief.

"What is there to leave for now?" he said.

I knew very well what he meant and wanted desperately to hear him say it. In the same way, he knew that I knew; but he was too hard to ask for pity. I wish he had asked me. I could have given him so much.

"As a doctor I'll do what I can to make your journey easier," he said. "You'd better take some sleeping pills from tonight to ensure that you do get enough sleep. And I must insist that you give up writing in that book of yours. It taxes your strength and we must do all we can to conserve your strength. Three days is not sufficient notice but I shall do the best I can."

"You are asking me to gamble," I answered. "You could easily forbid me to leave."

"I wouldn't have you gamble with certainties," he said. "You are bound to lose in the end."

Suddenly I knew that he was closer to me than he'd ever been before. Even though our lives were to part, even though we were never to see each other again, he was close to me. As if the threads which bound us to life had unaccountably, moved by a stray breeze perhaps, touched and shivered at the contact.

"Whatever the others might say," I told him, "I shall never forget what you have done for me."

"What have I done?" he asked.

"You have given me a reason to live," I said.

He didn't smile. "No one can give you that. You must find it for yourself."

"All right, I have found it but you will not find me ungrateful. I will keep my promise about leaving my money to this hospital. I want you to have the money to make this the sort of place that you would like to see it. And I want you to know that I do it because of you. I do it because of what you have taught me."

"There was a time," he answered, "when I should have thanked God, fasting, to hear you say that. When you first arrived I thought I had found in you the answer to my prayers. There was so much that I wanted to put into this hospital. It's a dreary place but it could be a home and a refuge. But now, I just don't give a damn. I don't know what to do with the money."

I know very well what he means and how he feels. Her renunciation has pinned him more securely to his duty. He cannot escape it now, he must live it through to the end. Perhaps that is what she wanted to tell him. Perhaps she could find no stronger words.

I don't think he hates her for what she did. I think he has long accepted it as right. Perhaps he is grateful to her for showing him the path again. He is already reconciled; his sorrow will not last long. He will end his days in a halo of righteousness and piety, a halo formed by the flames that consumed the girl.

My reconciliation is at hand too, and it is another young girl who shows me the way. Today her presence is in the room with me, a shadow which hovers over my bed. It is she with her youth and her faith who will show me my duty again. I do not know what I shall say to her when I see her again. I wonder if she will recognise me, if she will smile at me? I hope she will. I want love from her

as much as I want anything else. I want the end to come soon.

Now of course I know why Raj wants me to move, now I can appreciate his purpose. He too is gambling on a certainty, the certainty that I shall not reach Kataul alive. He's so certain about this that he's even willing to leave me with the woman. "The nurse will be here on Friday," he told me today, "and she will accompany you in the ambulance. If, however, you still persist in taking the woman with you we can no doubt find room for her."

I suppose I should be appalled, terrified, repulsed by his motives. It would be murder in any other circumstances; but I am of the same stuff as he and, in his position, I would do the same. There's no further use for compromise, nothing more to be gained by pretence.

It's Wednesday today and in three days I shall be on my way to Kataul. There's a thin sickle moon in the sky and very soon I shall see it wax round over the mountains. I shall see the shadows that it throws among the pines and shall breathe in the snow-washed airs.

I know Kataul so well though it must have changed a great deal since I saw it last. There's a club-house there and a cinema just above the car park; and on top of the hill which is shaped like a cow's horn there is a temple built of grey stone. It's difficult for a stranger to find that temple for the tall pines have long overshadowed it and blocked it from view.

There's a path which leads down to the northern valley from that temple which comes to an abrupt end by a little brook at the bottom of a hollow. I think that path is Kataul's glory. It begins mysteriously, shaded from the light by the pines; and then, suddenly, it opens out into a little round platform of emerald-green grass, so symmetrical that it must surely be man-made. I used to have

a theory that this platform was built by some primitive mountain-worshippers whose faith or instinct led them to the only spot in Kataul from where one can look, through a cleft in the snow-covered peaks, to the plains beyond. The geography books don't mention the existence of these plains, they insist that the ranges are endless; but I know better. From that platform one can see the plains and it is not an illusion of the eye. From that hallowed place I have seen another land, with green fields and tall graceful pines. In the softness of the sunrise I have seen shadows moving and in the quiet of the dusk I have seen the twinkling of lights. I have spent many hours on that platform and have never once been denied that view. I can't subscribe to the theory that those snow-covered peaks hold no majesty beyond the height and depth of the mountain ranges.

The little houses on the ridge of Kataul seem to cling precariously to the ledges and hollows, almost as if afraid to let go. There's one particular house there which I nearly bought. It charmed me the moment I first set my eyes upon it. It's set right below the ridge, almost in the depths of the valley, and the road to it is steep and long, seeming to wind round and round the mountainside without purpose. But once there, the view grips the heart. One can see the brown plains far away below, and above, the ridge of Kataul, magnified out of proportion by the angle of vision. At night the lights from Kataul seem to form another sky.

I believe my school doesn't exist any more. I have been told that it has been turned into a private guest-house. I don't think I am particularly sorry; I don't want too many reminders of my past.

I believe the sanatorium is a new addition. They tell me it's set on the ridge which branches off the main road.

I know that ridge well for there's a bridle path which links it to Kataul. In my day there used to be a little refreshment hut on the corner and always two or three lorries and buses drawn up alongside. Now, no doubt, it's a thriving restaurant with more sleek cars than lorries drawn up in front of it.

Aunt told me that the sanatorium was set on the northern side of the ridge and commanded a magnificent view of the mountains. I am glad of that. My eyes crave for those mountains as do my lungs for that air. Cool, dark, snow-washed green in the daytime, black emptiness at night, with perhaps an occasional swirl of orange as a forest fire sweeps through the pines. It will be beautiful.

I am going to have a wonderful time up there with Nimi. I shall show her all my favourite spots, places which the summer tourist never finds. She will rediscover Kataul through me. Yes, I can let myself think of this now without fear. I shall be there in four days but already my mind has travelled in advance of my body and I am there now.

## XXIII

THE nurse has arrived and there is nothing more to do. I am ready to leave but, as usual, fate must play this last act in her own way. A telegram arrived for my brother this afternoon and he must leave before me.

Both the woman and I saw the man cycle past in his khaki uniform and she, quicker off the mark than I, went out immediately to find out who the message was for. I didn't give the man much thought, thinking it was only another of those innumerable telegrams we have been having from Kataul during these past two days. There have been so many forgotten details to attend to. But my brother came into the room very soon afterwards, the telegram in his hand; and for one dreadful moment I thought I should not see Kataul.

However, the news wasn't so bad. An ammunition ship had blown up in the docks and set off a string of explosions. He would have to return immediately.

"Is there much damage?" I asked.

"One of the warehouses is completely gutted," he said, "and the second is on fire." I suppose I should have sympathised with him, for I know how much money he has put into his business, but I didn't feel sympathetic. I asked him if he was insured and he replied irritably that it wouldn't cover the damage. "The new harvest has just come in. It's a dreadful thing to happen."

He paced the room uncertainly, debating with himself;

and then he suddenly seemed to make up his mind. "I shall leave immediately," he said. "If the roads are clear we ought to be able to reach by lunch-time tomorrow."

"Of course you must go at once," I said sarcastically.

"You realise that this is my business," he rounded on me. "If I can't save anything out of it I shall be ruined."

"I sincerely hope you can save something. Ruin is such a dreadful word."

He stopped short by the table. "Never more so than now," he said, "have you proved yourself absolutely heartless and selfish."

I refused to be angered. "You don't expect me to throw a fit do you? I've no interest in your business. And please remember that I too have a journey in front of me and must be quiet."

"I haven't forgotten," he said grimly. "Perhaps it was too much to expect sympathy from you."

"I'd be willing to give it if there was a reason," I said.

"You don't care what happens to anyone, do you?" he asked slowly. "You don't care what happens to anyone else as long as you are all right. Anyway, it doesn't matter." His eyes lingered on the little black box. "I can handle this very well alone. That's one thing I am proud of. I've built up my own life from scratch, with no one to help me. That's no idle boast."

"It's easy enough to forget what others have done," I said. "It's easy enough to belittle the work of others."

When he left me alone, hurrying away to make his arrangements, I thought of all that I could have said to him. He's blamed father for so many things in his life; he's forgotten that if it weren't for the education that father had given him he wouldn't be half the man he is. Could he expect any more from his father than that? If one were to judge by the standards that he brought with

him he should have been thrown out of the house when he was eighteen.

I wasn't very sorry to hear about the warehouses. If he was to damn his father for leaving him no inheritance he could not quarrel with the fate that was in store for him. He deserved to lose the reward of his labours in the same way as father had lost his reward. There is a subtle order in the nature of things which brings the wheel full cycle.

He came in again, just before lunch, to tell me that the others had decided to leave with him. It would save them an awkward journey if he took them down by car. "There's plenty of room," he said, "and it takes two days by train."

He waited for me to object, to protest, but I wasn't going to concede him that final triumph. I might hate the idea of spending my last evening here alone but I will not show him that. He must believe that it is what I want myself.

"Perhaps it's just as well," I said. "I don't want to listen to their nattering this evening."

"Yes," he returned, his voice full of malice, "you can have peace at last. Endless peace."

"It's better than I deserve," I replied.

"And anyway, you still have the woman."

I didn't think he could be so vindictive. It's quite obvious why he has done this. He daren't leave any of them alone with me for fear of being left out himself. He's afraid I might grow closer to them. He trusts them as little as he trusts me. His is the suspicion that will live long after I have gone. I suppose I should laugh to know this but somehow I hate him for what he has done. I hate him afresh. It isn't that I am afraid to travel alone. None of them could help me in that fear. It is just that I should have liked to have them with me. I should have liked to

have someone of my own beside me at this moment of departure.

So. They are going to leave me as suddenly as they came. Already this room has withdrawn from them and already I am alone. I am back once more where I started.

They should have gone by now but something went wrong with the car and they have had to postpone their departure till early morning. If the delay has upset him he has given no indication of it. He came in to say good-night a little while ago and the sight of this book on my knees seemed to amuse him. "Writing your life story?" he asked. I am glad I am not to see him again before he leaves. He feels himself completely master of the situation and there's something disgusting about his confidence.

The others have also said their goodbyes. Although their departure has been postponed and they could have spent this last evening with me they have preferred otherwise. "It's not really goodbye," Malini said inanely, "we'll be seeing you again very soon in Kataul."

"Be careful of the woman," Sharada said, eyeing the woman suspiciously. "You'd still be better advised to leave her behind."

If those were my farewells to them I'd rather forget them. If I am to see them again they said too much. If I am not to see them again they said too little.

There's a wonderful moon tonight. It's not yet in its second quarter but it has lit the heavens so brightly that I can scarcely distinguish a star. It has lit the earth with a glowing incandescence in which the forest and the sentinel tree are bright splashes of black. I can make out each little particle of gravel on the path outside and here and there my eyes catch the reflection of the moon from a piece of mica.

I suppose I should be afraid of seeing the hermit from that forest tonight. I suppose I should let my imagination run riot and see his shadowy form peering into the verandah through the wooden screen. But it's too bright a night for ghosts.

There's no breeze tonight and the air is quite still but the scents of the forest are pungent and strong. The scent of wood and leaves and, over all, the scent of the *mogra*, the queen of the night whose petals are a dazzling velvety white. Should I see an omen in this too? These are the flowers of the dead, the flowers in which the corpse is decked. But they are such beautiful flowers, perfect in their formation, sweet in their scent.

It's a holy night, the kind of night one associates with carols and hymns and the chanting of priests. Still and soundless with no fear lurking in the shadows, no movement to distract the eye; just this soft brightness which has no connection with the stark brilliance of the day.

Perhaps I shall write no more in this book now, perhaps this really is the end for me. If it is, let me say just one thing more: Tonight I know the peace of God and I know it because Nimi is waiting for me at journey's end.

Tomorrow this place will be empty of us and our tormented hates. Tomorrow the hospital will return to the unbroken quiet of its days before we arrived. I hope we shall indeed be able to leave it in peace. I don't want to think that we shall haunt this place for ever with our hates.

The pills that I must take are lying on the table beside me but I cannot yet reach out my hand to take them. They hold the certainty of the present in their smooth roundness and I don't want to kill that certainty just yet. I want time to stand still. I want to go no farther. This is peace, fulfilled, consummate.

# XXIV

High Ridge, Kataul.  
9th September.

My darling Daddy,

We got your letter and Mummy says she will answer it as soon as she can. At the moment she is up to her eyes with the sale. It's coming off on Saturday and we are hoping to collect twice what they did last year. Mrs. Smith (I don't know if you remember her, she sings) is doing a concert at the club and I've been selling tickets. I've sold two books already—good going?

Auntie arrived yesterday. We were expecting her the day before but the nurse said that the river was in flood and they had to wait all night for it to subside. I'm not surprised; it's been raining a lot here and you know how miserable it can be when it rains. There's been a mist over Kataul for the past two or three days.

I didn't see Auntie but went to the sanatorium with Mummy and waited outside. What an ugly old woman she has with her, all shrivelled up and such dreadful teeth! Mummy says she will try and get rid of her. But what a garrulous old woman she is; she was in the mood to talk and I couldn't get away. She told me all about the journey. Apparently it was full of accidents. First they knocked down a buffalo—that's rather funny—and then they had two punctures and, of course, the river. The woman said that they had driven on to the ferry and had

started to cross before they discovered that the water was too high and had to turn back. I think that was rather careless of the ferry-men, don't you? They should have known what the water was like. Mummy said that the journey hadn't done Auntie any good and she had a very serious face when she said that, so I suppose Auntie must be worse.

You know, I think I feel rather sorry for her. It must be dreadful to be dying like that. I suppose she is dying though that woman swears that she will be up and about in a few days. The woman seems to be very fond of Auntie. I suppose Auntie must see something in her, though I can't imagine what. It takes all kinds, doesn't it?

The boys have just come in and want to send you their love. I don't know why they don't write themselves but they are so full of that model aeroplane you sent them. Did Mummy tell you that they nearly had an accident with it? They let it off in the garden near the pond and, you know how steep it is there, they nearly fell in! It wasn't really so very dangerous but it gave them an awful fright. At any rate, it'll teach them to be careful.

There's no more news. Except that we are always thinking about you and wishing you were here.

With lots of love from your loving,  
Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.  
Wednesday, 11th.

My darling Daddy,

The commanding officer at the rest centre has taken five books of tickets—just like that. Isn't it marvellous?

I never thought he would. Anyway, that makes seven books, besides the few that have gone from the eighth. It looks as if I shall sell more tickets than anybody else. Congratulate me? The boys say it is because I am always making eyes at the commanding officer but what can you expect from boys? I think they're fed up that they've got to go back to school next week.

How's everything with you? I hope you're not worrying too much. Mummy says you are not to and she's quite right. Worry doesn't get you anywhere.

I've been down to see Auntie today. Mummy was going but at the last moment she had to go to the Club to see about some tables and I offered to go instead. I think one of us should go there at least once a day. I took the short cut along the bridle path and it was quite a pleasant walk. The mist lifted for a little and there was a wonderful view across the plains. For a moment I wished I was down there, it looked so warm and dry. The path was ablaze with flowers—those purple things, I can never remember the name—and I picked some intending to bring them back to Mummy. But when I got to the hospital Auntie's room looked so bare that I left them for her. The woman couldn't find a vase and we had to put them in a water jug.

I wasn't able to talk with Auntie. She seemed to be very weak and I don't think she recognised me at all. But she did try to smile when she saw the flowers in my hand. I wish she hadn't. It looked terrible, as if her lips had stuck together and she couldn't part them. I didn't stay long, chiefly because the woman started to talk again and I can't stand her. And anyway, I don't think I was doing much good.

No more news, so I'll end with love from us all, especially me,

Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.  
14th Sept.

My darling Daddy,

What a day it's been! Your letter arrived just as we were leaving for the sale and it was nice to know that things are not as bad as they seemed at first. We had to leave early because of the arrangements and, in spite of the weather (it's been pouring steadily all day), all Kataul was there. We didn't have any time to breathe. I was helping on the sweet stall and everybody wanted to buy. I don't know how much they made (Mummy's still at the club, reckoning up) but I should think they've done very well.

But the concert was ghastly. Mrs. Smith can't sing and it was quite painful to listen to her. I am sure everyone was fed up although they sat there and applauded—oh, so politely. Whew! I was glad when it was over.

I had to leave early because I had promised Auntie I'd call and tell her about the sale. I've been going to see her every morning now and I always take her some flowers to liven up her room. I don't think they've chosen a good room for her. There's no view at all.

She's so pathetically glad to see me that I sometimes feel very guilty about her. Perhaps I should have written a note to her or something while she was in that hospital. She must have been very lonely there.

She recognised me for the first time on Thursday. "You're Nimi," she said and I nodded rather foolishly, not knowing what to say. "It's nice of you to bring the flowers," she said and I noticed that the woman had found a vase and put them on the table beside the bed.

We went for a picnic on Friday. The sun suddenly came out and Mummy thought it would be a waste of a good day if we didn't go out. I think she wanted to keep

the boys out of mischief; with school looming up before them they seem to be worse than ever. We went down to that temple and had our lunch about half-way down on the other side. It's quite a pretty little spot, we must go down there together one day. But it's infested with monkeys and it wasn't very pleasant. Especially when one fat old fellow came and sat on a tree above us and made horrible faces at us because we wouldn't give him anything to eat! However, I picked a bunch of wild flowers and took them to Auntie and when I told her where I had picked them her face suddenly seemed to light up. "It's almost as if you know," she said, though I don't know what she meant.

When I went in today she'd made the woman move the other flowers and had the little wild ones on the table beside her. "They mean quite a lot to me," she said. She didn't seem very interested in the sale but when I told her about Mrs. Smith she laughed. Did I say laugh? Her mouth tries to laugh but her eyes suffer. She must be in terrible pain. I wish the doctor could do something about it. I said something about it to the nurse and she replied very starchily: "We're doing the best we can." I think the nurse is annoyed that Auntie always calls the woman if she wants anything and never her.

Mummy's just been in to say that they made 520 rupees. That's not bad is it? Over a hundred more than last time.

Well, I must stop now. Supper's ready and I can hear Mummy calling me. Our love as always,

Yours,

Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.

18th September.

My darling Daddy,

Your wire has just arrived. There's really nothing to worry about. I never stay with Auntie long and the doctor knows that I go there. So does Mummy. They wouldn't let me go if there was any danger but, however, we're doing as you say and I'm having an X-ray.

Please Daddy don't worry about me. I'm perfectly healthy and well. There's no point in your making such a fuss, particularly when there is no one else to visit Auntie.

Yours,

Nimi.

High Ridge.

20th September.

My darling Daddy,

I think I was a bit abrupt with you the day before yesterday but I was annoyed about the wire and the fuss everyone was making. Mummy was so worried that she forbade me to go near the sanatorium. But we went to see the doctor yesterday and he laughed at us. He's such a kind man. He told us there was no danger as long as I didn't stay too long and didn't touch anything in the room.

I was so pleased I went straight away to see Auntie and I'm awfully glad I did. I think she had missed me and was afraid I wasn't coming any more. I told her what had kept me away and she smiled very strangely. "Of course he will worry," she said, "but I don't mean you any harm." I don't know what she meant. However, it was

a lovely day and she soon was quite gay again. The sky was a clear bright blue and the air so clean that we could make out almost every house on the ridge. I told her I was sorry that she didn't have a room with a better view but she said she didn't mind. "I've got the best I deserve," she said, "and I know those mountains by heart."

She told me a funny little story about how, beyond those mountains, there's another country with people living in it. She told me to go down to that little platform and have a look for myself. Of course it's ridiculous. There's nothing there till one gets beyond the mountains but she seems to believe the story so implicitly. Perhaps you're right when you say that she's not quite in her right mind. However, it was rather fun seeing her again.

There's nothing else to tell you. The house is upside down packing for the boys to go back to school. They are due back the day after tomorrow. And Mummy is in one of her end-of-holiday flaps. She's terribly sad to be losing the boys and terribly worried that there's still so much to do before they go. They are always needing new things and I'm afraid we've had to put off the shopping because of the sale. Now you can imagine us living in the shops for the next two days!

That's all for now. Write soon.

Your loving daughter,  
Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.  
23rd September.

My darling Daddy,

Auntie isn't making any improvement at all. The doctor says the journey was too much for her and whenever I talk about her getting well again he pulls a long

face. At first he used to say that all she needed was time but now it's over two weeks and, if anything, she seems to be weaker. But you'll be glad to know that the doctor says that my visits to her are doing her a world of good. So you see, I am not wasting my time, as you suggest. Since you can't be with her I'm trying to take your place. I think she must have someone of her own around her and though I don't really know her I am sure I am better for her than twenty strangers. She said today that the ties of blood were strong. I think I know what she means. I feel somehow drawn to her even though we have so little to say to each other.

Most of the time we just sit quiet, with the woman crouching in the background. And sometimes she suddenly comes out with some funny remarks. Today, for instance, just as I was leaving, she said: "We must never sit in judgement over others."

There's something on her mind which is worrying her. I wish I knew what it was. I wish you were here to help her. I know you would be able to help her. We talk about you so often and she asks me how you and I get on together. I told her that I loved you very much and she said: "Love is sometimes a burden." I don't know what is worrying her but I feel that you would be able to help her much more than I can. It's a pity you can't leave just yet; but I am glad everything is going so well. Nowadays, you don't mention your coming up here; don't you intend to?

The house seems very empty without the boys. It's really quite depressing. Even Mummy doesn't seem the same. But that's bound to be. It's amazing how much noise they could make.

My love to you,

Yours,

Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.

24th September.

My darling Daddy,

No, I don't believe Auntie is losing her mind. You can't expect me to believe that. Whatever she says to me is full of good sense. And you seem to imply that she's got something against you. That's not true either. She's always talking about you and saying that she would have liked you to be here. She says she has a lot to tell you.

I asked her if I couldn't pass on a message to you and she smiled a crooked smile and said no. "What we have to say to each other," she said, "doesn't belong to you. I want you always to remain as lovely as you are." It was nice of her to say that, wasn't it?

Mummy came with me today and we joked quite a lot together. She can be very amusing when she wants to and quite charming. She must herself have been very lovely when she was young. It's a pity we didn't see more of her then. Mummy said that I spent quite a long time with her when I was about three or four but I am afraid I can't remember anything about that. It's funny though how she disappeared from our lives, isn't it? After all, she is your sister.

I don't think Mummy likes her very much though. I don't know why, but they don't hit it off at all well together. They talk to each other like strangers. But she's not a stranger when she talks to me. You should have heard her telling me about grandfather today. He must have been a wonderful person and I think she must have loved him very much for her eyes filled with tears when she talked of him.

I can't write any more. I've promised to be at tennis at four and it's a quarter past already.

Love from,

Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.  
29th September.

My dear Daddy,

There's no point in your forbidding me to see Auntie any more. She's dead. She died early this morning and there was no one with her. You can forget all your worries now. She's not alive to fill my head with silly thoughts any more.

I've been such a blind fool. I knew this was going to happen. I should never have left her alone like that. How terrible it must have been to stare out into the darkness knowing that the end had come!

You see, she knew she was going to die. That knowledge was in her eyes when I went to see her yesterday morning, a far-away look that seemed somehow possessed with a frenzied intensity. It was as if she knew and had opened her eyes wider to look for what was coming.

I don't think she was afraid. Fear is for those who have not accepted death and I know that she had accepted it. I had never seen her so quiet, so resigned.

It was I who was afraid. I didn't know what to make of the expression in her eyes. I was so used to seeing them either weighted down with pain or blank with her own thoughts that the sight of their wide-awake concentration shook me and I could not meet them. Oh, what a fool I was! I knew she wanted me to stay, I knew she wanted to tell me something; but I was afraid and ran away.

I tried to will myself to stay in the room but somehow those eyes were too strong for me. I made a poor excuse about having someone to see and left immediately after arranging the flowers in the vase. I hadn't brought any fresh ones and that too made me feel a little guilty. "You don't always have to bring me flowers," she said. "Whatever you do will always be right by me."

I know you'll say that I'm making a mountain out of a mole-hill. You'll think I'm being ridiculous when I tell you that I went straight to the clearing below the temple and tried to look for the country she had so often talked about. I could see nothing; only her eyes filled with something I could never understand until I myself had reached the end. I tried also to remember all the things she had said to me but all I could think of were her parting words: "Whatever you do will always be right by me." She knew I was running away from her.

I know I should have gone back. I promised myself that I would go back in the afternoon but the Rams came to tea and did not leave till after dark.

And all the while we were talking and joking and drinking cups of tea out of delicate china cups she was waiting for it to come, knowing I could have helped her and refused.

I wonder if she will ever forgive me? I haven't the heart to go to the hospital now. The funeral is to be this evening and Mummy is going. I dare not.

Dear Daddy, what was it that she wanted to tell us? I know it was something important and I feel you know what it was. She spoke about you so often. I wish you were here. What is it that keeps you away? Can't the business look after itself for a little while? Can't you come up soon? I'm feeling so unhappy and uncertain.

Yours,  
Nimi.

High Ridge, Kataul.  
2nd October.

Dear Daddy,

You must have received my last letter by now but you needn't bother to answer it. She has herself given me the answer and I am ashamed of what we have done to her. She didn't ask much from us but we have failed her, all of us. She was so lonely. Life had treated her so badly. We could have tried to help her.

Aunt Ganga arrived yesterday; so did Aunts Malini and Sharada. The house is full of aunts, all indignant, all peeved. You will no doubt hear a lot from them but since she is not here to speak for herself I must speak for her. It is a duty she has entrusted to me.

But let me start at the beginning. I didn't go to the funeral but at the time it was being held I suddenly felt called to her room in the sanatorium. I hurried there, not knowing what I was to do, but when I saw the little black box I knew what it was that had called me. It was still under her bed and I picked it up to find that somebody had broken it open. It contained only a lot of papers and a thick notebook and some empty jewel boxes. The doctor told me that he had found the box lying on the bed when he came in in the morning. It seems that the woman had broken it open and absconded with whatever valuables it contained. She had even taken the fountain pen which Auntie had written with. I don't know why the woman bothered to break open the box; the key was within reach, around Auntie's neck. The doctor thinks that the woman must have been wakened by Auntie's last struggles and, seeing there was nothing she could do, absconded with the valuables. Of course that box must have contained quite a lot of jewellery and, of course, they've put the police on to the woman but I doubt if they'll ever find

her. She had five or six hours' start and, if she took the bridle path to the plains, she must be well away now.

I'd do anything to get my hands on that woman. I think I could kill her for the way she left Auntie to die. And particularly after all that Auntie has done for her. She must be the devil incarnate to leave a person to die like that!

I brought the papers home with me. Since Mummy hadn't come back I started to go through them and, of course, began to read the book in which she had written. I didn't mean to read it but once I had started on the first page I could not put it down. She must have cried very often while writing it for the pages are splashed with tears; and I cried often while reading it.

Oh, Daddy, I don't know what to say or to think. It is such an unhappy story that she has to tell and it must be ghastly to be so lonely and alone. I don't think she was at all mad. She was trying so hard to be reasonable all the time. She couldn't help losing her temper at times. I wish you could have helped her more. I don't mean to blame you at all, but I don't think you were very fair to her. After all, she had so little.

You know the rest of the story already. You must have received the wire which told you about the will. (Need I tell you that all the other aunts are hopping mad. To hear what they say about her one would think that she had no heart.)

But there's one thing the wire didn't tell you, which I alone can tell you. The will she made bequeathing everything to the hospital was not the only one; there was another, dated the 20th September, in which she left everything to me. I don't think it was a proper will as wills go but she had copied the wording of the other will very carefully and it sounded very legalistic. But, if you

want to be legalistic, it wasn't signed by any witnesses. I suppose she intended to have it witnessed but never got around to it.

Anyway, I tore the second will up. I know you will be angry with me for this but, really, it had no value against the first will and I don't want the money. It can do very much more good in the hospital. We've got enough to live on, what should we do with more?

I haven't dared tell the others about the second will for that would make them more angry than they already are. I must tell you though for I want you to understand why I did it. "Reproach can be hell," she said to me once and I don't want to live with that reproach. I know she wanted to give me the money but I don't think she'd have forgiven me if I had taken it. She did give me free choice but our treatment of her took that choice away from me. If she is to have any peace in the hereafter we must keep faith with her now.

I agree that there is no point in your coming up here, especially as we are due down ourselves very soon. I'd like you to see what she wrote and so I am bringing the book with me. But please don't tell the others about it. They would never understand.

Love,

Nimi.

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